A MOMENT IN TIME

With Legends of Indian Arts

Alka Raghuvanshi

Interacting with artistes and artists on stage or through their art may give a glimpse into the legacy of their genius, but their persona sans the glamour of the arc lights is hardly ever explored. These are the people who have made this century special by their sheer presence. This collection is an attempt to understand the events that shaped their personality, which in turn had an indelible impact on their art. It cuts across both performing and plastic arts to give a pan-Indian overview of the culture and heritage of the sub-continent.

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— Alka Raghuvanshi

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To my parents
Santosh & Jaswant Rai Luthra

Acknowledgments

A work of this dimension is impossible to do single-handedly. Fortunately, everyone who helped bring the dream into reality had faith in it—even if it took its time to come together. Neelima Singh planted the seed in my head to put it together in a collection way back in 1988. There it stayed till the then Secretary of Culture, Bhaskar Ghosh had faith in it. That is when the movement really started. I was willing to wait, but not compromise on the kind of book artistes of this calibre deserved.

My family and friends who did not abandon me despite long disappearances and all those people who are special because they believe in you. My long suffering husband Manoj who put up with my late hours, cranky and tense behaviour rather stoically. ITC Welcomgroup for their support. Bindu, Saras Kamal, Shona Adhikari, Monisha Mukundan, Paul Jacob, Hardev Singh, Keval Arora, Sumita Thapar, M.P. Cherian, Dhiren Dhaiya, R. Hariharan, who got quite a few grey hair putting the book together.

For the first time, the entire 'art' book was shot by news photographers. Photographer Manish Swarup who did most of the personalities, went through fire and brimstone to meet some rather impossible deadlines. Arko Dutta, Phal S. Girota, Bir Bahadur Yadav, Alwin Singh, Rajesh Kumar, Shobha Deepak Singh, Ryan D'sa provided the additional photographs. File photographs were provided by the artistes themselves, National School of Drama and the Sangeet Natak Akademi.

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Preface

Art is perfection, and the constant quest for it sets the special individual apart from the crowd. This is not to say that artistes or artists attain it everytime they lift their brush, tie on their ghungroos, touch their instruments or open their mouths to sing. They do not. But when they do, that creates a moment of magic and wonder that is worth all the pain, the effort and the heartbreak of the journey.

And time is measured only in those moments of totality. Like all good things of life, such moments too are rare. This book is a collection of such moments with legends who have so helped refine the aesthetic perceptions of an era, that they have become almost synonymous with their chosen art forms. In interviewing and writing about these representatives of a special age in the history of India's artistic heritage, the attempt is not to analyse and chronicle their lives, but to understand their struggle and the legacy of their genius.

Speaking to each individual is fraught with its own peculiar set of problems. After you have chased them and pinned them down to a meeting, you might find them surrounded by a plethora of hangers-on. Then, they may take an instant dislike to you and decide to clam up — they are sensitive souls.

Fortunately, that never happened to me. What did happen in the initial years was that my aesthetic or artistic appreciation of their genius often left me tongue-tied. It was much later that I discovered that this was an effective tool for interaction! My working knowledge of Bhojpuri, Avadhi, Punjabi and Tamil helped me establish a rapport which was virtually instantaneous. In many of these meetings, I often switched languages. But then as they say, words constitute only seven per cent of communication.

It is this faith that one is communicating to a kindred soul that makes any interaction meaningful. As a consequence, I have been privy to a lot of information that has not found place in the published piece for some of it was shared in a moment when it was just two persons talking and not a writer speaking to an artiste.

That they are all creative, goes without saying. Some of them are also selfish, egoistical and eccentric. Parallel to the need to express is the need to share the manifestation of that expression. Otherwise how can they even want and expect to hold the undivided attention of hundreds and thousands in a darkened auditorium? Or share their paintings and sculpture with veritable strangers?

It is death for the artiste if the motivations of their creativity are not understood, ageing some before their time and making others wiser. To many, appreciation has come not a day too soon. Perhaps that is why they value it more and fight to retain it.

In this day and age, the concept of connoisseur, the 'rasika', in the classical sense of the term is no longer valid. Neither is that of the true 'kalakar' or artiste/artist. Some of the artistes have withdrawn. For others, the need to share has become even more acute. Some have become part of history while this book was being compiled and I am glad that I was fortunate enough to have shared these moments with them. Moments they may be but they are not transient — that is why the urge to share them in a book form. There is a great deal of interdependence in Indian arts and by including artistes from all disciplines, the idea is to present a holistic view of Indian culture with all the hues that make the rainbow glisten with a special light.

Many of them have drawn a lot of flak before emerging as "one of a kind." Experimentation within the parameters of tradition has been the core of their creative genius. This is the thread that binds them together and makes them what they are — Legends. Undoubtedly.

Alka Raghuvanshi
New Delhi

SATISH GUJRAL

An artist is an 'ism' in himself

His warmth and earthy sense of humour draws one to Satish Gujral immediately. Devoid of the excess baggage of 'nakhras' or airs that mark top artists, it is his unassuming countenance that endears him to many. Diminutive and gregarious, the multi-faceted genius is not only a painter and sculptor but has turned his creativity towards the not-so-related field of architecture as well.

Crusading for two decades now to make people take note of architecture, he says, "Your thought process is affected by the kind of house you live in." If his own house is any indication, he certainly thinks on various levels. Designed by Satish himself, the red brick house is built on several levels and has an open, yet cozy look about it. Satish's favourite space is his mezzanine floor den, again on split levels. A small round studio is tucked into a corner of the room. A glass wall which overlooks the more formal living room and the garden outside gives it a sense of rolling space.

His exhibitions are "an autobiography of my feelings. I consider an exhibition only when I have something radically different to say. Even if I have booked a gallery and no new attitude has emerged during that period, I cancel the show. Holding an exhibition with old attitudes is like having a Diwali mela."

There was a definite shift in the choice of colours in his works in '93. While the earlier works are marked by more brooding metallics, there is a shift to the brighter and happier hues in the later period. The sculptures are reminiscent of his earlier Ganeshas in wood, but the similarity ends there. For one, these sculptures are four dimensional, as opposed to the relief work he used earlier. They have a totally fresh approach to imagery. "I have used a different technique and thematic approach, yet all have the common factor of bas relief. They deal with the predicament of man. This is the one element of

Man, sculpture in bruntwood

my works of earlier days that is still continuing," he stresses.

It is this concern for the predicament of the human race that perhaps impelled him to crusade for more aesthetic living quarters and public buildings. "I have been shouting myself hoarse since 1950 that instead of having art in public places, a public place should be made a work of art."

His passion for architecture and the end result initially made 'qualified' architects bristle, but later the School of Planning and Architecture, New Delhi bestowed on him an honorary degree and Satish is now a practising architect. The Belgian Embassy in New Delhi, the CMC research and development building in Hyderabad and a few private residences designed by him are unique examples of his use of natural light and space.

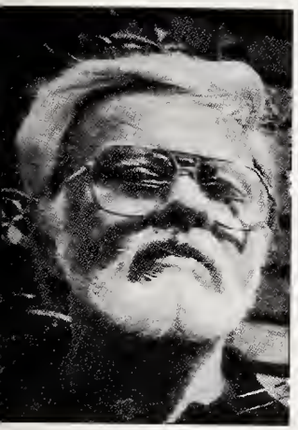
Satish has always maintained that a building must breathe with a single man's breath. Consequently, he finds the 'add-on' kind of murals totally extraneous. "When murals are used as ornamentation, rather than an intrinsic part of the building, it ends up more like a pretty decoration rather than a work of art."

His familiarity with his subject is phenomenal. To this day Satish is able to create a plethora of surfaces in his work as he does not work on a prepared canvas, but makes his own canvases. He was among the first to use acrylic colours as well and has not stopped experimenting with different media and a range of colours which he manufactures for himself.

His fame has also invited a fair amount of criticism. A charge that is often levelled against Satish is that he has used his proximity to the Nehrus to bag contracts for murals and other government assignments. "In all I have done only three murals for the Government: The Northern Railway head quarters, Shastri Bhawan and one for the Delhi High Court. All these were passed by the decoration committees. For the Railway mural, I had to pay from my own pocket to have it installed as the department did not have the funds! When the Shastri Bhawan mural was sanctioned, Lal Bahadur Shastri was the prime minister. The High Court mural was sanctioned during the Emergency, when my relations with Indira Gandhi had soured because I had opposed the Emergency," he clarifies candidly.

Not one for mincing words, Satish says dismissively, "In the creative field, even fathers have not been able to make the world accept their sons, what to talk of politicians."

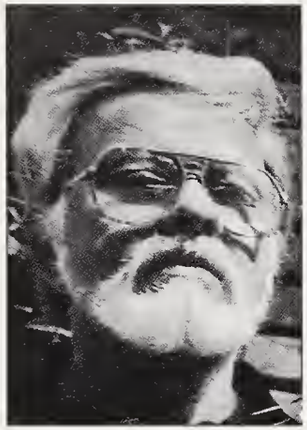
Satish's father, a freedom fighter who took to politics, had to move the legislative assembly to ensure that his son got his place in the sun. A multiple fracture at the age of 11 had Satish bed-ridden for nearly two years and, while he was still recovering, an ear infection permanently impaired his hearing. It was during this time that he was drawn to painting.



His hearing impairment came in the way of most of his formal schooling. He went to an art school in Lahore and later to the JJ School in Bombay. Later Satish taught himself to lip-read Urdu and Punjabi. On a scholarship for study in Mexico, he learnt English. "Perhaps had I been here, I might have felt too self-conscious about my pronunciation, but there everyone's English was much worse than mine, so it was perfect for me." His wife, Kiran, also helped him polish up his speech. As for his own speech, he pronounces some words a trifle strangely, but manages to convey what he wants to say in no uncertain terms.

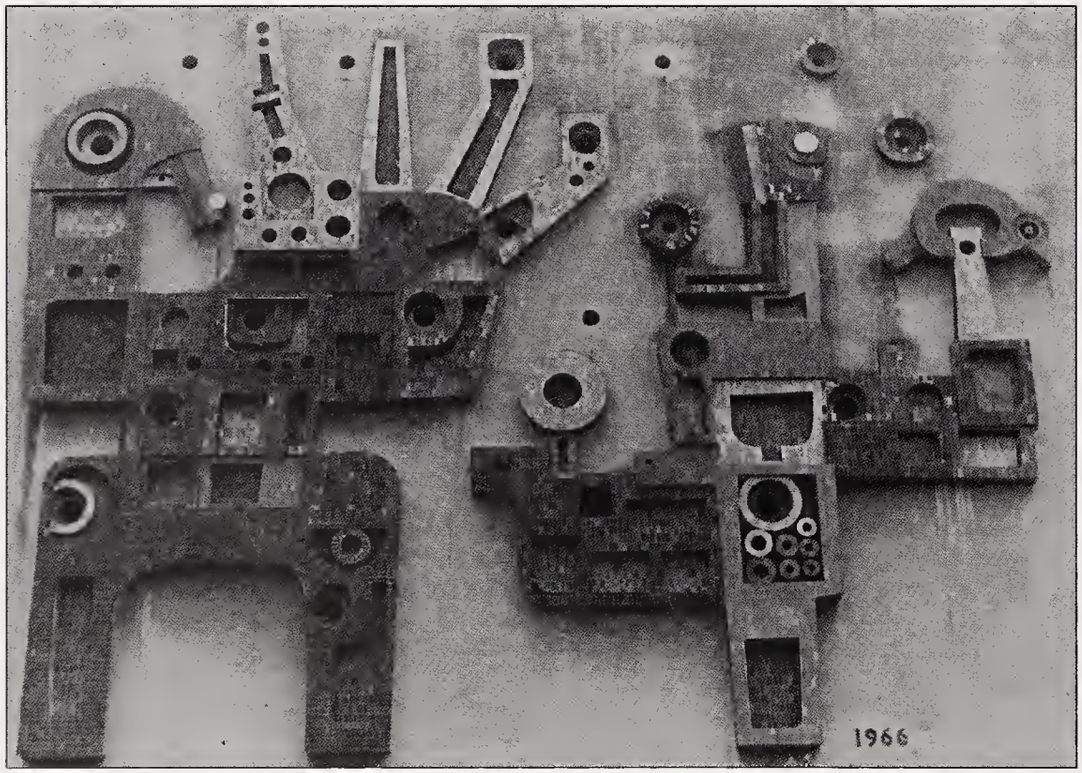
He recounts how he got the scholarship. "My bother, Inder, came to know of a scholarship to Mexico. On the day of the interview, he and I reached the venue, clutching two huge canvases. A stenographer in the ministry told us I stood no chance and the only hope was if the Mexican attache was impressed by my work. All through the interview I kept addressing a person who I thought was the attache. The interview was a disaster. Later we came to know that the attache was not even present! I had mistaken an Indian for the attache. I was the most unlikely candidate. Works were sent to the embassy for final approval of the Mexican government. Octavio Paz, the then cultural attache

Fantasy, acrylic on canvas and (right) *Crucifixion*, in bruntwood



happened to like my work. But people in the ministry had decided on another candidate. They conspired against me to not send my letter. The automatic choice then would be the other artist. The steno friend advised me to write a registered letter accepting the scholarship. They had no option but to send me!" he chuckles.

His Communist antecedents threatened to jeopardise his scholarship, as he had been thrown out of a Punjab Government job for leftist leanings.



Satish's disillusionment with the Red Brigade came in Mexico when he learnt of the goings-on in the Soviet Union. "In Mexico, the artist community was invariably red. My faith evaporated when they told me harrowing tales of atrocities. On my return, I turned in my membership. It was Communism which betrayed us, we remained faithful to it," he says sadly.

Despite his one-time ideology, he does not believe in dedicated art. "I have been associated with progressive writers like Krishen Chander, Rajinder Bedi, Sadat Hasan Manto and others. Their ideological faith shaped their writing, but that cannot be so in painting. And now you see mediocrity riding piggyback on ideology," he adds emphatically.

Satish believes that artists are not men of ideas, but of feelings. "Those who believe in 'isms' rather than individual experiences are no artists. They use 'isms' as crutches. This is an indication of some shortcoming in their artistic ability. Each artist is an 'ism' in himself. His only duty is to himself," declares Satish.

Just as he has consciously stayed away from getting caught in a rut of agit-prop, he has also stayed away from typecasting a 'style' in his work. "A style is never of an artist but of his emotional content. It is the harmony with the emotional content which is called style on which an artist is judged: The more suitable the style..." he trails off, only

Mourning en masse from the Partition series and (facing page) mural at Rail Bhavan

to continue: "The trouble comes when the artist thinks a particular style to be his and becomes a slave of the image and the brand name. It is this which makes an artist lose his creativity. What they do not realise is this slavery is making them depict sorrow and joy in the same style. Besides, it makes an artist selective, saying he will not tackle a certain theme because it does not match his style."

Satish blames the art audiences also for the artist getting into the rut of styles. "They want to see what they have already seen. It satisfies their vanity, for otherwise it would test their ability and judgement."

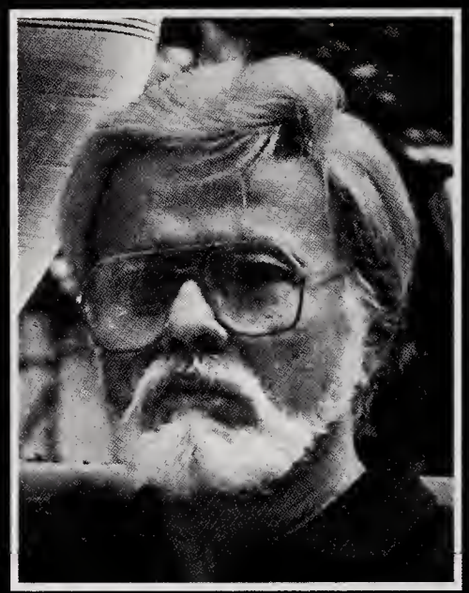
It also explains why Satish's work has such a variation of 'styles'. He says, "I let my subjects choose their styles. After designing a concept, I ask what material it wants and let it decide. I select a style as it suits my emotion. When it is no longer suitable, I shed it."

Satish recalls how he spent sleepless nights on the matter of style. "I was no longer the man of yesterday. Yet I had an image. But once I broke that shackle, there was no looking back. When we can have different ragas for different times and moods, why not for painting?"

His present mood is of total rejection of style. "I do not reject the signature type of art, but each work a particular artist creates is as much original as a man's signature — for each work will be identified with a particular artist for its singular character."

This singular artist has added another characteristic to his many facets. He has turned writer as well. His autobiography, The World of Satish Gujral, gives an insight into the artist, the man and the art world in which he lives. The old saying about several doors opening when one slammed shut has never been more true.

SATISH GUJRAL



Born in 1925, Satish Gujral graduated from Government College, Lahore. He trained at the Mayo School of Art, Lahore, Sir JJ School of Art, Bombay, Palacio Nationale de bellas Artes, Mexico, and Imperial Service College, Windsor. He has exhibited all over India and abroad. His works are in the collections of the World Trade Centre, New York, Museum of Modern Art, New York, Welcomgroup Maurya Sheraton, New Delhi, Hotel Oberoi, New Delhi, Delhi High Court, Gandhi Institute, Mauritius. Honours include National Award, Lalit Kala Akademi, Order of the Crown of Belgium, and Fellowship of Rockefeller Council of Economic and Cultural Affairs, New York.

M F HUSAIN

I do not seek media attention

The first thing that I noticed about him were his shoes. Considering the last time I had met him he was living up to his reputation of being the barefoot artist, it came as a bit of a surprise. Either he was getting old or Delhi had suddenly become very cold.

I had to fast abandon the theory of his getting old, as M F Husain, the stormy petrel of Indian art, bristled with barely controlled anger over the state of contemporary art and allegations about his own attention-seeking "gimmicks". "I do not seek media attention, the media is hungry to give attention and so they give it," he insisted. That may well be an eminently debatable statement, but it was evident that the artist has not been resting on his laurels.

He has been at it again. He made a dramatic entry into the National Gallery of Modern Art, which bent over backwards to accommodate a contemporary artist for the first time. The Department of Culture was moved to seek special permission for the show. The NGMA in collaboration with Vadehra, a private gallery, exhibited Husain's creations on world civilisation at the NGMA.

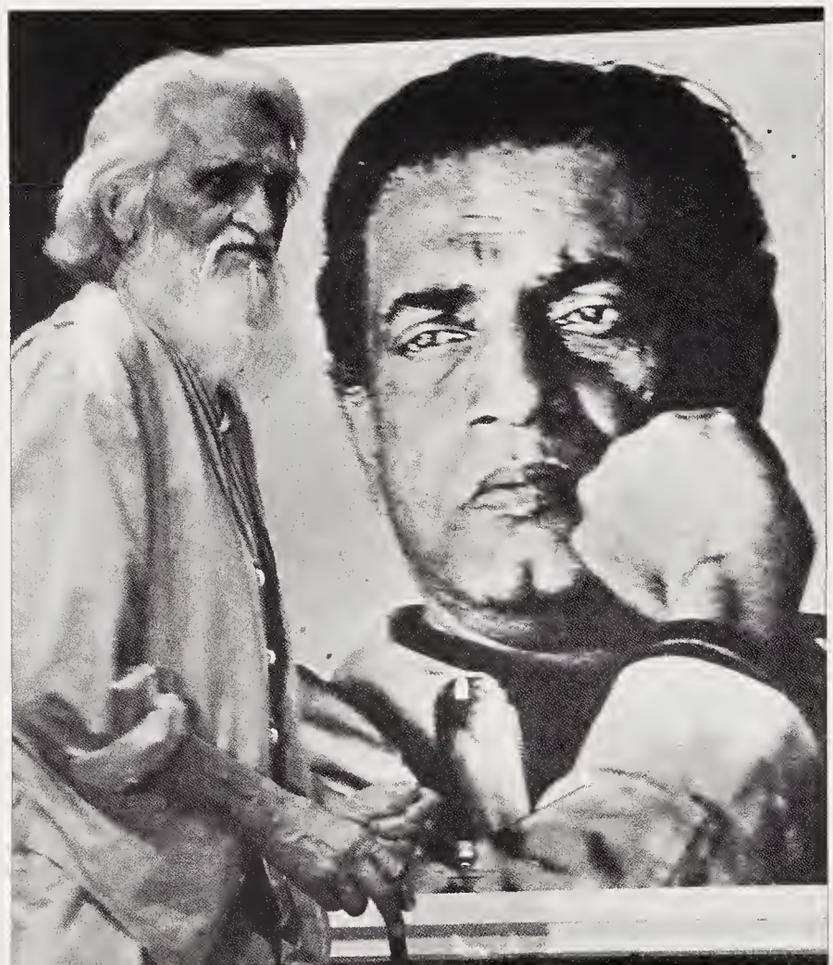
Nearly 40 works painted over a period of 18 months by the maestro were mounted in 1993 in one of the wings of the gallery. Husain himself oversaw the display. Amid the hammering, he was directing carpenters and deflecting questions all at one go, as half a dozen others stood by in attendance.

The exhibition was entitled Let History Cut Across Me Without Me. "I am all for global civilisation. The idea is to create an icon of this age that is global. These are no drawing room decorations but strong statements. They are huge for a purpose. If miniatures were enough, where was the need for an Ajanta? The people had to be addressed. I have tried to depict a universal thought. The focus is on the Mahabharata," he said with an arrogance that was Husain.

Except for the shoes, he was his usual self: A certain amount of self-assurance peppered with an almost defensive name-dropping of well-known Western artists and references. In the same breath flaying the trend of "certification"

by the Western "authorities" and pseudo-intellectuals. "Painting is becoming the slave of language and 'isms'. And pseudo-intellectuals are elbowing themselves in and mouthing words which don't amount to much," he said.

The visual arts have been the most seriously hit by esoteric interpretations of art critics and writers who have succeeded in taking painting away from its moorings — the people. Often it is thanks to the fact that senior painters are reluctant to say anything about their work, leaving the field open for pseudo-intellectuals. "I have been blowing my own trumpet for all these years. Not only that, I've been writing about my art as well," Husain said.



Two greats: MF Husain flanked by a portrait of Satyajit Ray

His much decried and provocative Visarjan series, dismissed as a mere gimmick by most and defended by Husain as a "protest against crass commercialisation of art", comprised a series of six paintings of the goddesses of the Hindu pantheon and Mariam, in Calcutta. He painted for six days at a feverish pitch only to wash them white on the seventh day. He contends, "It was a very strong statement. It may not be understood now, but some day it will be understood. And even if it is never understood, who cares? I have every right to do it," he says almost defensively.

His detractors had asked at the time whether he could have done the same to the name of Allah in Pakistan. Husain snaps back, "It is the narrow minds who say it. They are totally ignorant of the composite nature of Indian culture. These voices will die down. This is the reaction when any new thing is done. The Renaissance painters and the Impressionists were treated so badly. Now it is the same people who are practically worshipping them," he says evasively.

Coming back to the commercialisation issue, he adds, "Just as leading galleries in Europe are under a mafia-like group, the same situation is beginning to prevail in India. They corner artists who are then exploited. Gallery owners do not have any committment to art, but see it as a mere

investment. How different is it from being shopkeepers?" How come he did not say all this at the time of the Visarjan? "I tried to say this at that time but the media was occupied with what they called a 'gimmick'," he defends himself, refusing at the same time to name the Indian mafia.

Husain adds, "There is greater value attached to a thing that has been lost. Memories of it are painful and haunt one much longer than something present. The paintings got a very tearful farewell from the emotional Bengalis. Even there I was asked whether I was doing it to raise the prices of my paintings. Tell me, is it a share bazaar?"

Husain contends that the Visarjan series went much beyond the mundane. "I work simultaneously on three or four

Husain's work inspired by Mother Teresa and (right) the artist in Bombay

Art or raddi: Husain's *Shwetambari* installation in Bombay and (left) a self-portrait in tapestry

different levels. That is also why I can work on two or three different canvases at the same time. An artist should know the language of painting instinctively. It is the vision that is lacking," he says. "Besides, an artist has to have restraint and control. What is the point of sitting in a corner and working on a painting for two years or 20 years? It is totally meaningless if the artist does not have a vision."

About Shwetambari, the installation that preceded Visarjan, where Husain had draped yards of white cloth in the Jehangir Art Gallery in Bombay, and created a cloth sculpture on a bed of 300 kilos of old newspapers, he says, "There comes a time in life when you want to create a sculpture. It is a tilt towards self-realisation. Shwetambari

has to be experienced. It defies words. Any thinking man can imagine and see what I mean. The problem is that we have got so used to thoughts being handed to us on a platter, that we don't want to think. And I have nothing to say to those who don't want to think."

Moving on to the reason that contemporary Indian art has not found a place on the international art map, Husain feels, "It is because there is not a single art historian with an international voice. Our writers are cut off from the visual arts unlike their counterparts elsewhere. They are stuck at writer Ismat Chugtai kind of romanticism — the melting candle, tear-stained face kind of thing. And artists cannot articulate their thoughts on paper. Most of them are not even aware of what is happening around them. Foreign writers are not exposed to contemporary Indian work. Some work has been done on miniatures but that is all. And the institution that should do something — the Lalit Kala Akademi — is sitting 'jung ki aad laga ke', hiding behind the excuse that war is about to begin."

Inspired by mythology: Acrylic by Husain

Strangely enough, Husain contradicts himself soon after. "Why do we need to see our paintings atop the Empire State Building? We are not waiting or hankering after recognition from the West. After all, they were barbarians until 400 years ago. Our culture has developed for 5000 years without their help. The problem is that the British have left, but left behind their Victorian offspring."

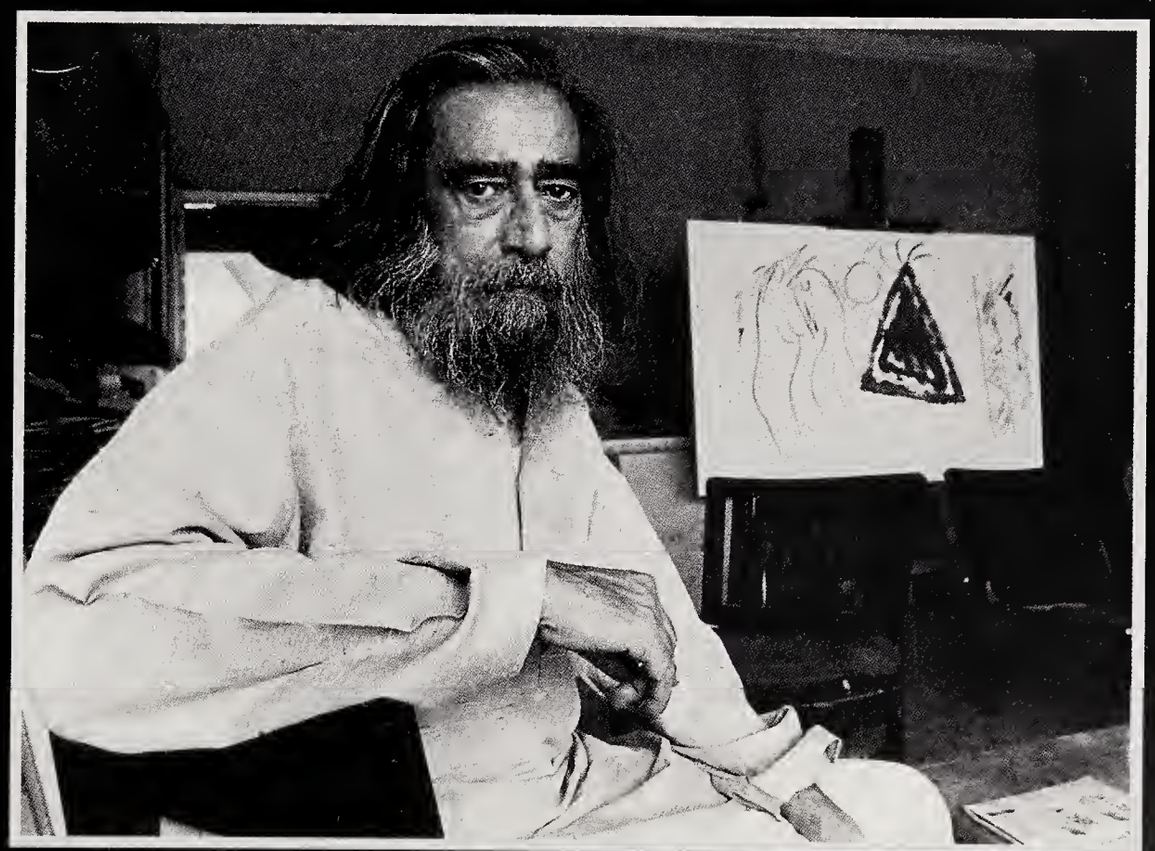
The major problem with contemporary art today is that there is a lack of political will. "Total philistines like Morarji Desai, when approached by painters with a plea to import good quality paints, said: Find another vocation if you want to earn money. Pupul Jayakar, who usurped the title of a cultural czarina, actually ordered the discontinuation of an exhibition of contemporary Indian art at the Tate Gallery in London, saying that the pinnacle of Indian art had been achieved and there was nothing more to be said!"

Daring me to print all he had said about the so-called powers of the art world, he said, "I say a lot of things, who has the guts to publish it?" Any complaints, Mr Husain?

M F HUSAIN

Born in 1915 at Pandharpur in Maharashtra, Maqbool Fida Husain spent his early years at Indore, Madhya Pradesh. He studied art at the Indore College of Art and Sir JJ School of Art, Bombay. In his initial years as an artist, he apprenticed himself to a painter of cinema hoardings. He was one of the six founder members of the Progressive Artists Group initiated by F N Souza in 1955. Husain has been honoured with the Padma Shree and the Padma Vibhushan. He has exhibited the world over and his works are a part of several important collections in India and abroad. He was nominated a Member of the Rajya Sabha as well.

J SWAMINATHAN



I came, I saw, I conquered . . .

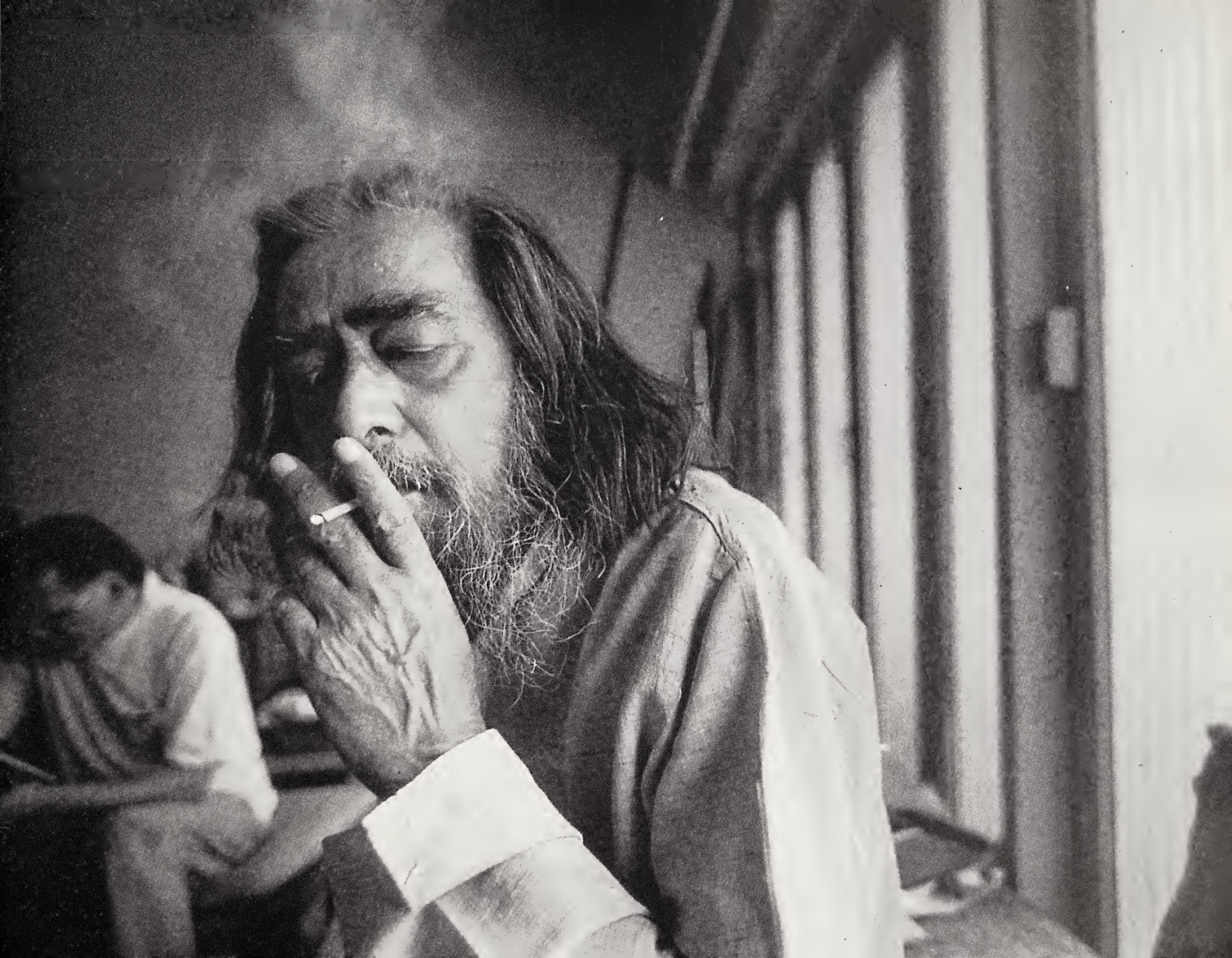
He was the archetypal artist: Long hair and flowing beard, crumpled kurta, with his sarong-like 'lungi' riding way above his ankles. One could always count on him to speak his mind. Rarely, if ever, would he hide behind anonymity. Willing to take a stand on an issue or event, he would stick by it and not claim that he had been misquoted — unlike some of his fellow artists.

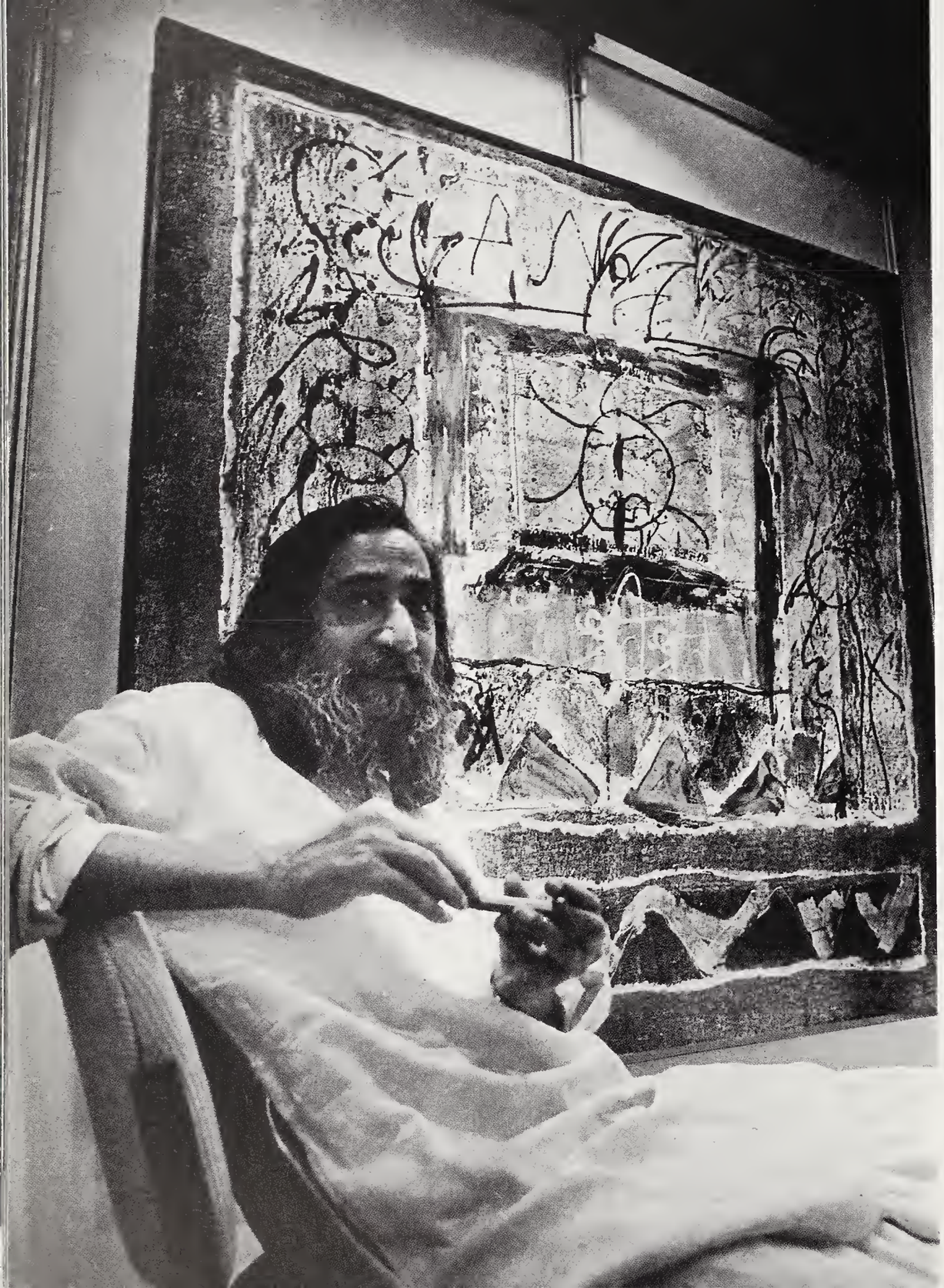
"Even when it is negative, publicity is always positive. People don't remember the context, they just remember that your name had appeared in the paper," he used to joke. And he had more than his share of publicity. For he made good copy — not only in terms of quotable quotes, but also in terms of substance. Easily one of the best read artists, he could look at himself with the same dispassionate ruthlessness with which he viewed others.

Jagdish Swaminathan. Artist. Idealogue of sorts. Short story writer. Poet. Journalist. One-time Communist. Controversial former director of Bharat Bhavan. Trustee of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts and Kala Parisar, art body in waiting.

"I wrote short stories but gave up when I realised I was no good at it. I got them published anyway, but that is another matter," he used to chuckle. He had the distinction of having consistently exhibited for the last 32 years in Delhi, barring a year or so in between. He also had the dubious distinction of being termed the stormy petrel of the art world.

Tracing stylistic changes in his work in the last three decades, Swaminathan had said shortly before his death in '94, "By and large I have been moving between two poles — one based on my relationship with man, that is culture, and the other based on my relationship with a larger reality, that is nature. My early years of painting were very intense. So much was happening, socially, politically and artistically. The Bengal school, especially,





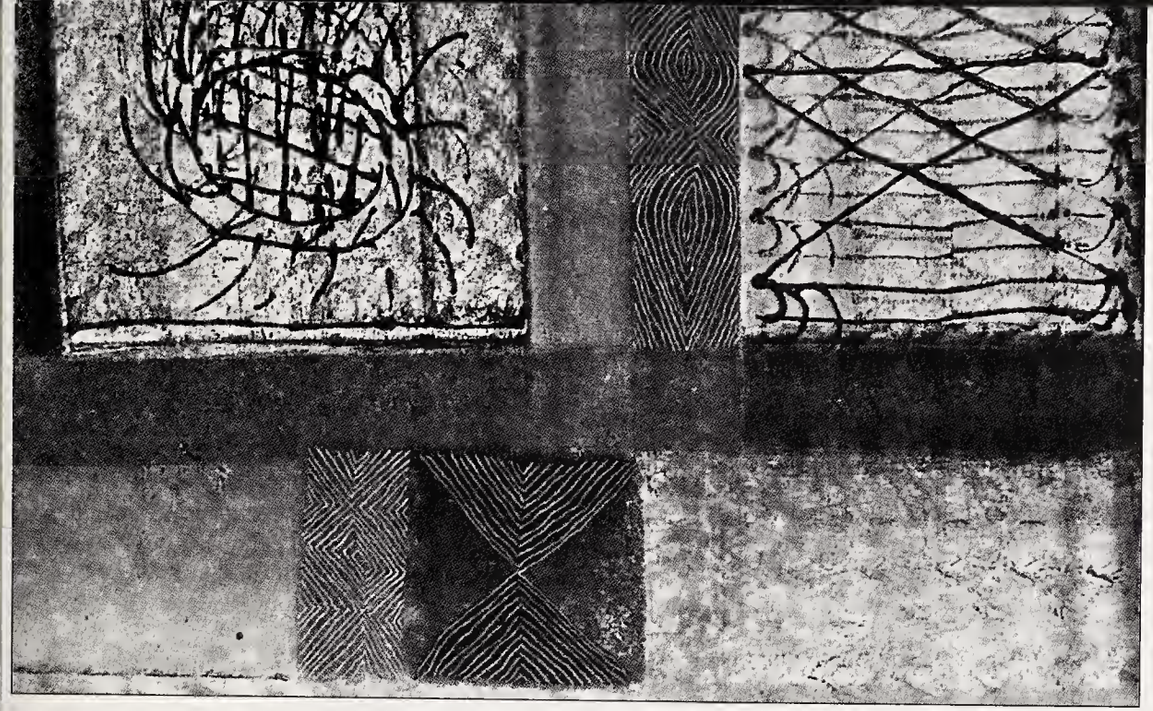
was influencing a whole generation."

Highly critical of the Bengal school of art which spread like an epidemic in his youth, he remarked: "Their pseudo-nationalistic approach is beyond me. You can't become modern by wearing modern clothes. It did not make sense to me then: It does not make sense to me now."

From short story writing to painting was a long and arduous journey. "I wanted to know what painting bloody well was. And I was no boy. I was already a grown man with a certain amount of experience and independent thoughts." His association with Octavio Paz, his friend and mentor, gave him a head start at that critical time. With the latter's collaboration, he founded and edited a short-lived art journal, Contra 66.

In the mid-60s Swaminathan's work explored the colour geometry of space, which was an exact about turn from what he had been doing earlier. "I started exploring space with a series based on the Pahari miniatures and tried to understand space through them. Leaving out the figurative and narrative aspect, I juxtaposed geometric patterns in relation to colours. Then began the phase which lasted from the late '60s to the early '80s, of playing around with cognizable elements like birds and mountains."

In '84 he "referred" back to what he had been doing in the 60s. "To my glee, what they called primordial was



already being done by me, sitting right here in New Delhi — Madhya Pradesh was very far away then." An indication of his involvement with the tribal art of Bastar was that initially he started out as a primitivist painter, using purely tribal and folkloric motifs.

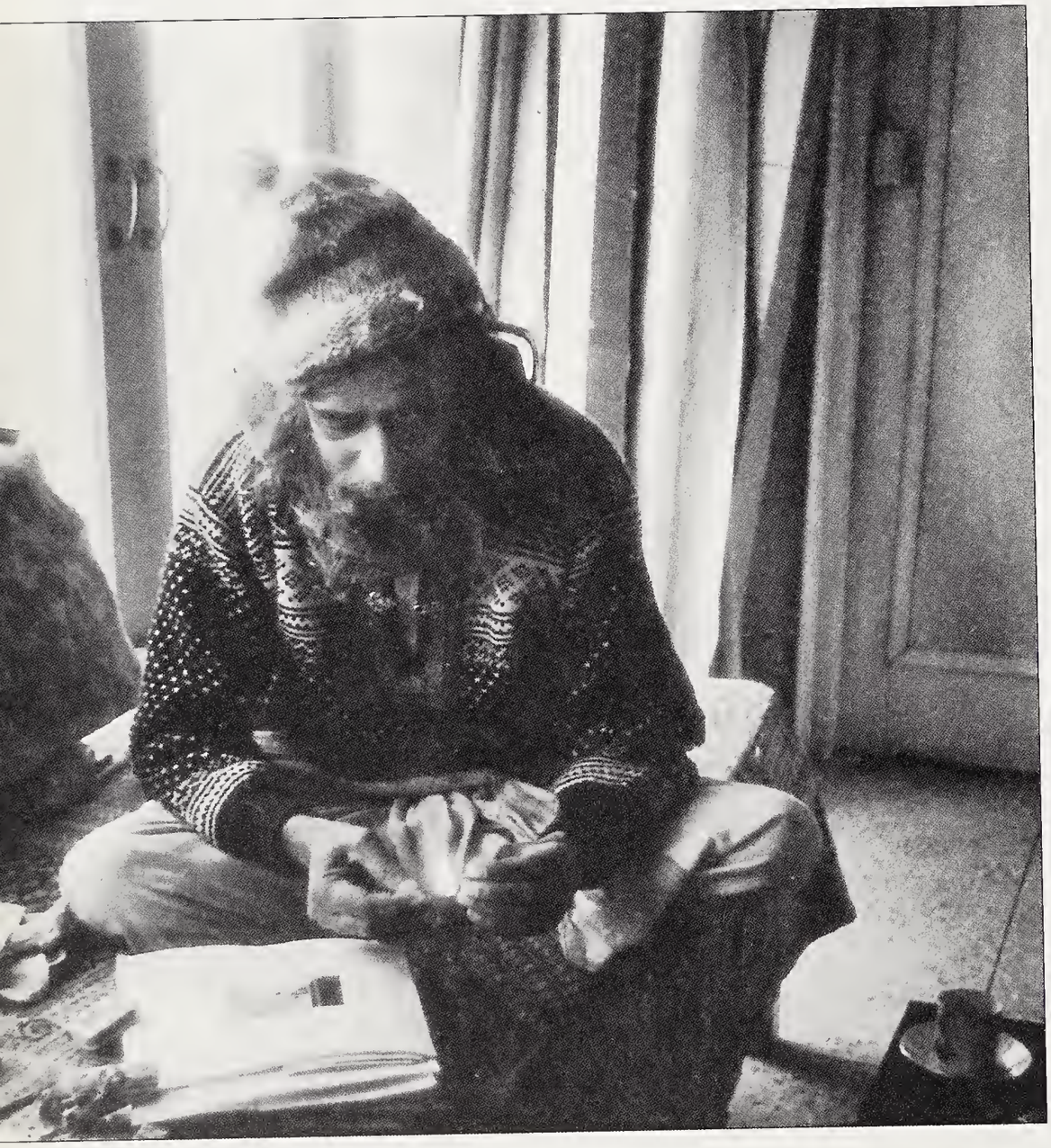
His latest works exhibited in '94 had that primordial quality of pure, raw energy in earth colours of dull green, charcoal and burnt sienna. He was going through a very important phase in his creativity. It was more than evident when he exhibited his watercolours in '92. Dubbed doodles by critics, they were in retrospect, the lull before the storm. For when he exhibited his canvases later, it was evident that it had been the important gearing-up period.

The storm after the lull: Works exhibited just before his death

That the gleaming yellow, burning and scorching sun fascinated him came across very powerfully in the work two years preceeding his death. Half the paintings were sold even before being exhibited. "Till as late as the '60s, very few paintings were sold in exhibitions. We would lug them right back and paint on top of them for next year's show," he recalled matter-of-factly. As a result, a number of his paintings, which could serve as an important link in his work, have been lost. And now, some of his paintings bought for a couple of hundred rupees, and dumped over the years, have been retrieved and restored for thousands.

For all his intellectual preoccupations, he would still find time to watch Hindi films, sometimes remaining glued to the television for two movies in a row. Once when I went to meet him, he refused to budge from his perch near the television until the hero had demolished the villain.

His independent spirit reared up early in life when he ran away from school after selling his bicycle during his pre-medical course and got involved with leftist groups — leaving his family at their wits' end. "I used to be caned

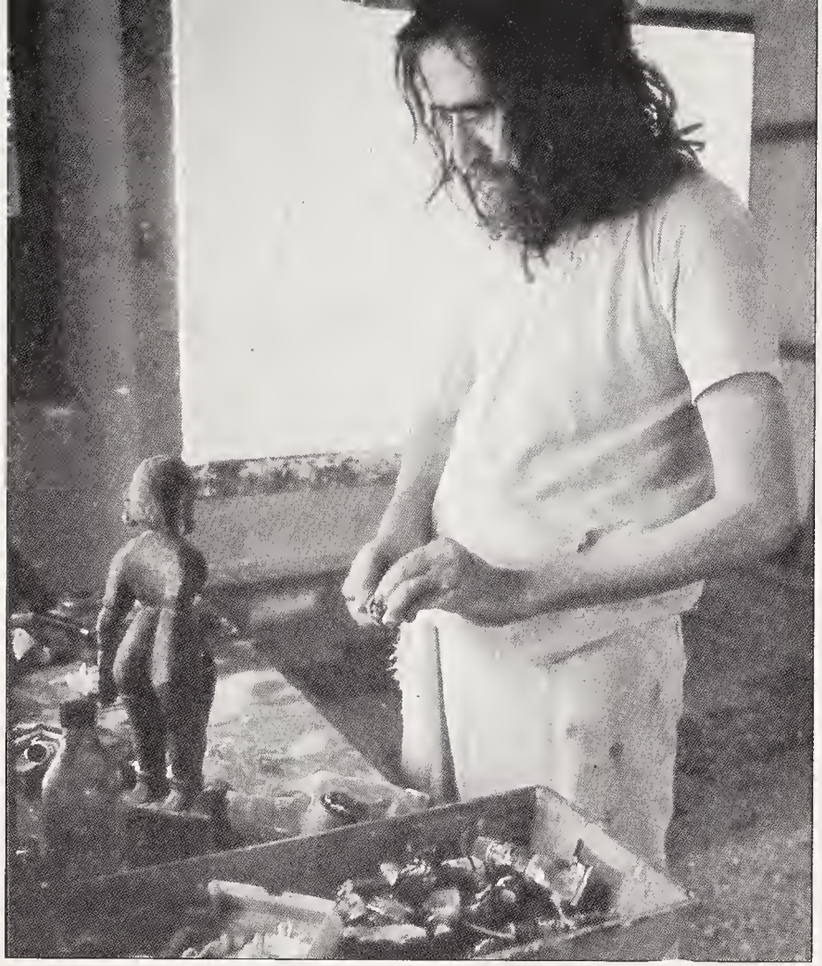


practically every day in school for naughtiness, and possibly I ran away to escape the punishment," he reminisced. "I was jobless, with no academic career to boot, when my brother-in-law got me a job as a sub-editor with Dainik Hindustan, a newspaper. After all, 'behnoi ko naukri dilwana to saale ka kaam hota hai'!" he used to say with a laugh, while his wife Bhawani grimaced.

Later, Swaminathan became a full-time functionary of the Communist Socialist Party, editing their party weekly Mazdoor Awaz in Hindi. "In '47, I took a copy to Mahatma Gandhi to seek his opinion. He was having breakfast. He looked at it, and all he said was 'akshar bade hone chaiye' — the letters should be bolder. This left a deep impact on me."

He joined the Link magazine in the '60s and wrote on South-East Asia and South Asia apart from designing the cover and looking after production. He recounts his dramatic departure from the magazine: "Once I had gone from the office to buy beer. After having imbibed some of the stuff, I took a taxi to come back. When the taxi stopped outside Link House, I looked at it, and at that instant decided that this was no place for me. I never went back!"

It was only after he quit his job that Swaminathan started taking painting seriously and started applying his mind to it, and also questioning what it meant to him. "All the while my passion for painting lay dormant. Funnily enough, I had



At his studio at home during the Bharat Bhavan days

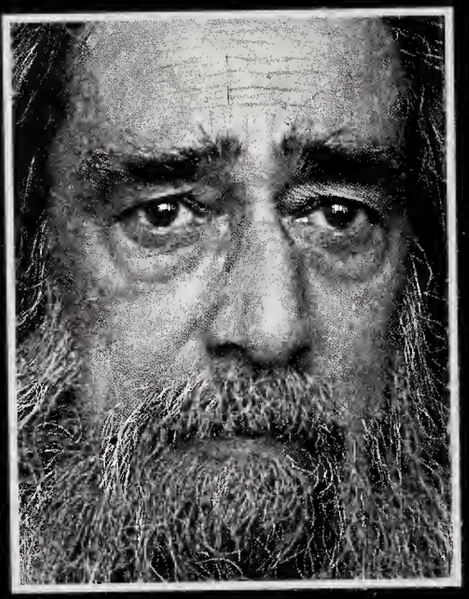
preserved a palette presented to me in childhood by my aunt. I still have it." An indication then, perhaps, of things to come. "I have been making a living from painting for the last 30 years. But all I can say is: I came, I saw and I conquered," he had said, with the ever present beedi in his long fingers.

About his controversial stint as the director of Bharat Bhavan in Bhopal, Swaminathan said, "It was a wonderful opportunity to put some of my ideas into practice, of breaking the walls between urban, folk and tribal art and what is known as 'modern'. But I am a domineering person and will not stay in an organisation that does not go my way. There is no point in building a faceless collection like the National Gallery of Modern Art, saddled with bad, unsold paintings — thanks to string-pulling by some artists. It is futile to patronise art in general. Patronage should be given only to what you think is meaningful. Of course there is bound to be partisanship in any buying of art, but there is no ulterior objective in exercising one's choice. 'Jahan kharid ki drishti hogi, wahan drishtikon bhi hoga hi' — where there is a view to buy, there is bound to be a view-point. It is only mediocrities and failures who talk in these terms."

In the '70s, when the market for art opened in a big way, only known names used to sell. But, given India's historical background, there is no such thing as a boom or an obvious crunch. "Why must only an artist starve? It is a wrong notion that artists live in style — 'nafa to hamara, nuksan to hamara' — both the loss and the gains are ours. One year you may sell, the next year you may not. When you don't, will the income tax wallah give you money to run the house?"

His living room, which also served as his studio, lies strewn with stacks of wooden mounts and rolls of canvas. The distinct smell of turpentine and paint permeates every nook and cranny. And now, the paints, brushes and canvases will never be used again...

J SWAMINATHAN



Born in 1928 in Simla, Jagdish Swaminathan was one of India's leading painters. Dubbed the 'storm petrel of the art world,' Swami, as he was popularly known, was also a writer and journalist. He was politically very active during the freedom movement. His passion for art began with painting landscapes of Simla when he was a young boy. His painting, in its varied stages, dealt with an imagery akin to that of pre-historic art, Indian folk and tribal culture, symbols derived from Indian mythology, geometric abstraction, and nature. He was a self-taught artist. Swaminathan died in New Delhi in 1994.

KRISHEN KHANNA

Painting is a jealous mistress

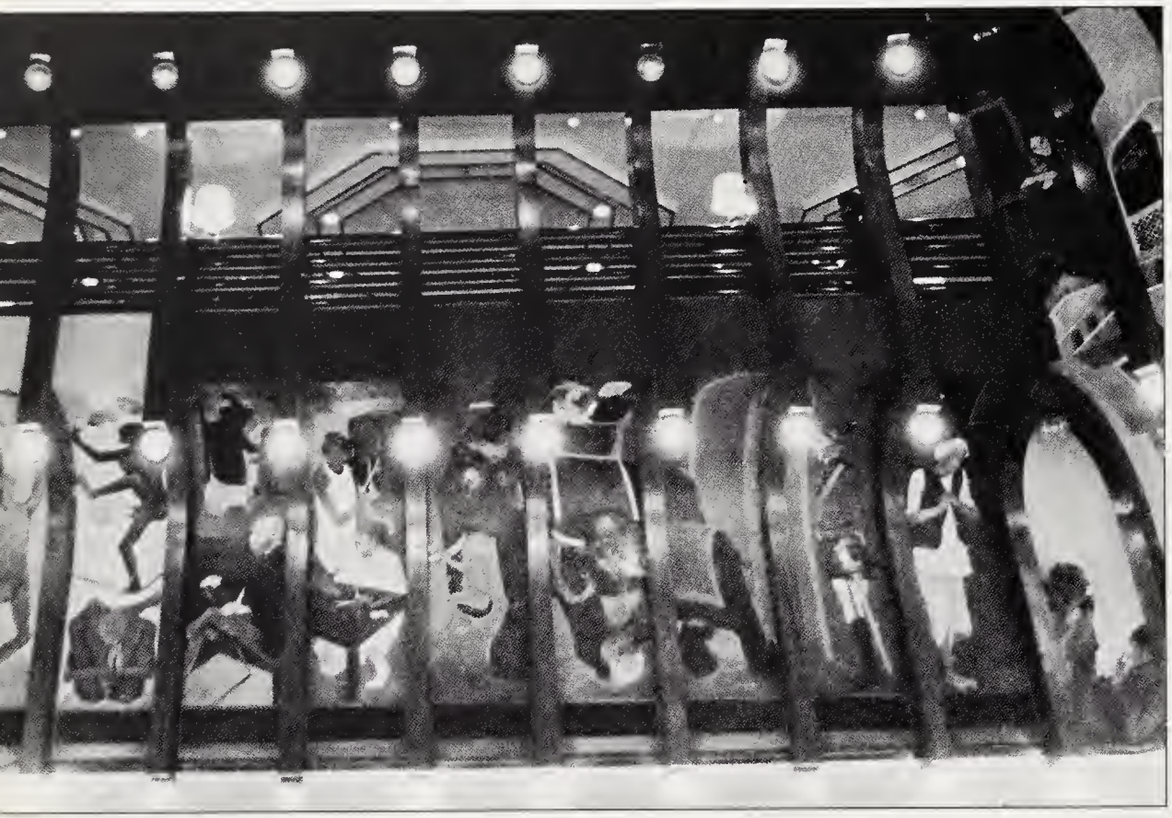
His studio has character. A veritable treasure trove of spatulas, knives and other implements on shelves take up all the available space on the stone walls. A mind-boggling array of brushes in cylindrical whiskey cartons, a few mismatched but interesting pieces of furniture, stacks of canvas in various stages of completion, works of fellow artists, pictures of his daughter, a Bharatnatyam dancer, and a vintage refrigerator thrown in for good measure!

Nothing is crass or new. There is a genteel air of understatedness about the place. In the midst of all this, sits artist Krishen Khanna, smoking a briar pipe. "Art has become a commodity. It is an object or a thing which is ultimately material. The end of a painting is to sell it, rather than do it!" he says matter-of-factly.

What matters now to Krishen is that the spirit comes through. "The making of a beautiful thing is craft. All straight middle-class people like it. You can go on striking the same form again and again. It is familiar territory. You are not treading new areas. I'd get bored with it. I want to give myself a chance to do something which is unknown. I would not want to use the known part of me all the time. Even if it is a failure, one cannot be afraid of it. After all, it is well within the bounds of the human psyche," says the artist.

There is a philosophic streak in the artist that comes through in his work as well in his person. His work of the '90s is marked by colours which hover between shades of violet, pale blue, white, even pink. The forms too lurk just beneath the surface, forcing you to seek them in the shadows.

"Just as spirit has to find a form, it tells the form what goes into painting is not mere material. Thought, feeling, societal concerns... it is a conglomerate of twenty million things. Eventually it depends on the quality of the spirit. I wonder how many want a painting for its spirit. A number



Detail of the mural in the lobby of the Maurya Sheraton Hotel in New Delhi

of paintings sell as they are flattering for the ego of the person who bought it," declares Krishen.

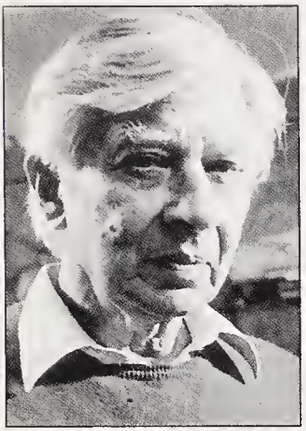
Does it not amount to more hype than art? I ask. "I think so. Personalities become more important than their art. Don't believe everything an artist says. There can be a gap between what they say and what they really mean. What claptrap artists write in their catalogues about creativity! They should try having a baby. Creativity today is like debased currency. Everyone is using it. They keep on holding exhibition after exhibition. When is the time to hibernate? I wish someone had a show of flops!" he quips.

To him, painting is like chance. After all, the best things happen that way. "If you keep repeating yourself, then you become like a dhobi, who puts his mark on all the clothes he washes. There is that moment for silence also. I want to do what I can't do. It takes a lot of living. When you have not been tutored, you are finding yourself. You try this and that for the urge to be is so strong."

Krishen is of the firm opinion that an exhibition is not merely a showroom at which to sell one's work. "I never put red dots on a painting to denote they are sold and pressurise people into buying my work. Corporate buying also goes into hype. Blue chip or not? Investment gets in the way of looking. You are thinking of money, not connecting to the painter."

An artist changes, moves forward, backwards, changing tenor all the time provided he is serious and not capricious. This change is indicative of growth. Painting, to Krishen, is an arena where the totality of a person makes a difference. "Every thought need not necessarily translate into painting. I'm not God. You see subjects that are appropriate. When you are dealing with a situation, you don't know where it is going to culminate. It has to be open-ended."

What about the commercial aspect of such art, I ask. "There is a thin dividing line between success and failure. I



wouldn't want safety now. Everything is in a state of flux, permanence is for the birds! Presentation for what? Museums?!" One can hardly argue with that.

"Pricing is so fortuitous today. If you've sold your work at a particular price, you can't underprice. My needs are limited. I don't want to buy another car or something. If there are enough guys willing to pay five lakhs, rather than reducing my price and undervaluing it, I'd rather give it away. It is not worth my while to oversell it. It takes me a long time to paint a canvas. I don't just rattle off a painting," says the senior artist. I suspect he is flattered when I describe him as one, but he asks modestly, "What makes me a senior artist? My white hair?"

As a person who has straddled both the worlds — West and East — he attributes the minimal commercial success of Indian art abroad to two reasons: "The major factor is distance. Like it or not, for an artist, where he lives is his ethos and consequently his conflicts. I'd rather live like an Englishman when in England. But I don't even know if globalisation in art is possible or for that matter desirable. This is not to say that there cannot be art which transcends cultural boundaries, but even colour has its cultural connotations. The whole idea of platonic art is false," he declares.

He has obviously thought a lot about the subject. With a thoughtful pause, he says, "All the NRIs long for India. It is a wilful exercise breeding nostalgia. Playing on the 'bindu'. The genesis is not the same, but in language that adapts to another value system. In the '20s there was interest in Paris and in the '60s, New York was the place. It was a special time. Now it is Asia which has caught the world's fancy".

Krishen Khanna tried his hand at printing in Lahore before

(Facing page) Detail from *Game* I and (right) painting entitled *That it is I myself handle me and see*

the Partition and at banking soon after, before turning to painting full-time. He was a senior executive in Grindlay's Bank for 14 years. When he decided to quit, he was offered several sops. But once the mind was made up, it stayed that way.

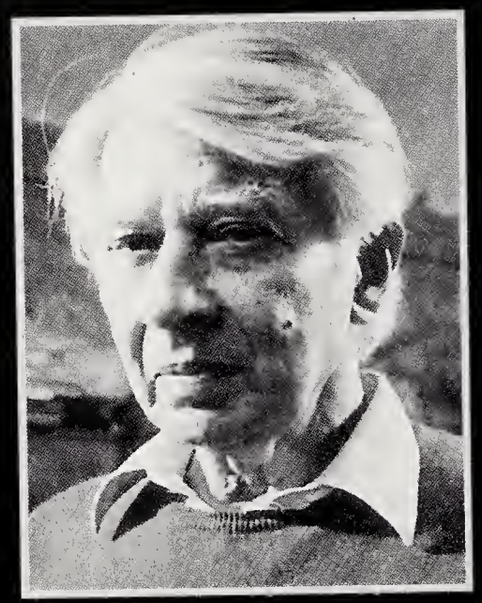
He exhibited with the Progressive Painters Group and sold his first painting, a figurative work, to Bhabha for Rs 225 in the late '40s. That was the beginning of the journey. Introduced to Ara, Raza and Gaitonde through his work on Gandhi's death, he showed in the famous eight painters' show and with M F Husain for the first time in 1954.

One of his more significant periods was when he became interested in ink. "I was in Hawaii at that time. I started doing inks in my hotel bathtub. I can't say about the paper, but what remained in the tub was rather interesting! I showed these works in New York. When people talk about openings, they don't know what they are talking about. Anyone who was someone in the art world was there," he recalls with pride.

Espying quite a few contemporary pieces of sculpture and painting in his studio, I do some loud thinking: Why is it that few artists buy contemporary works, I ask. "Most painters buy only miniatures. That is a period they are comfortable with," opines Krishen frankly.

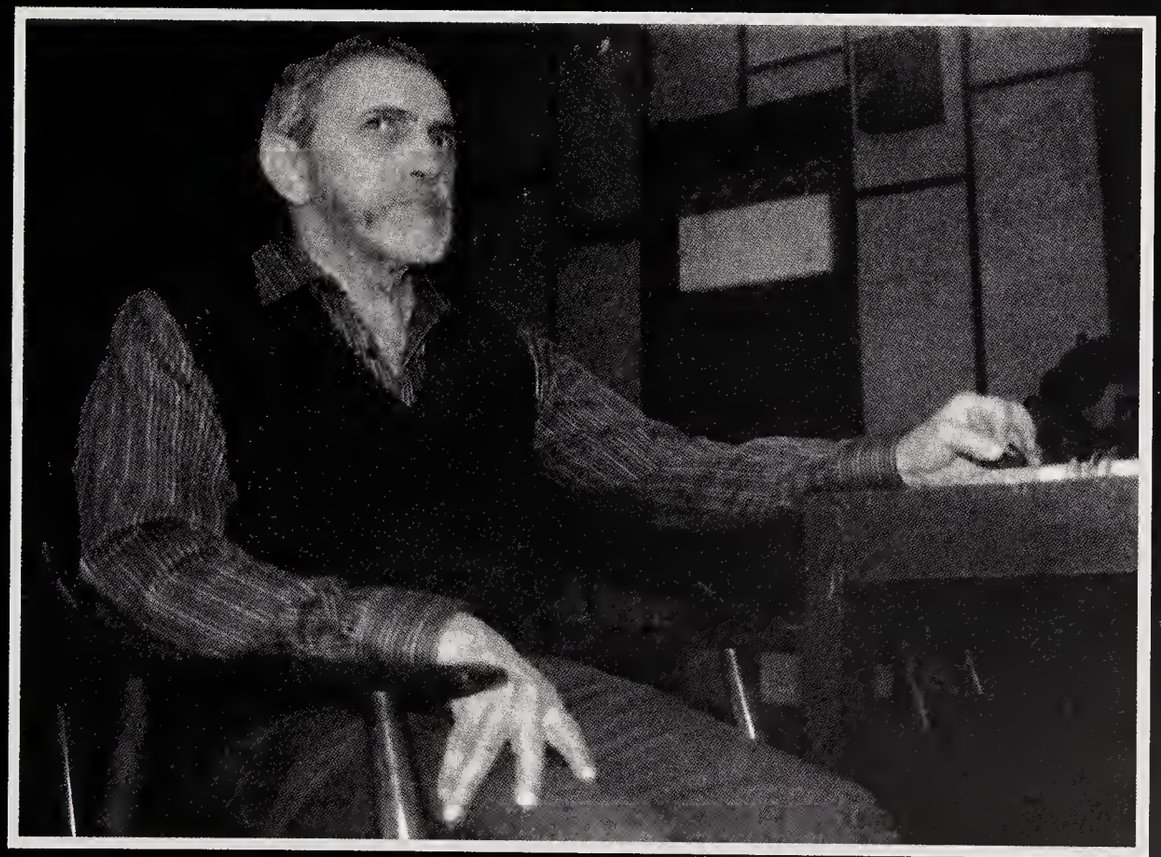
Considering several of his contemporaries have a reputation of being rather partial towards womenkind, what about him, I ask. "I know lots of women. I'm not impervious to their charms either, but they are not my wife. I married the girl I loved. We grew up together. Men are changed by what they do. Painting is a jealous mistress. It brooks no other. Relationships sour. Even love has to be preserved. To quote Eliot, 'What have I to give you save love and friendship...' As if love and friendship don't matter." Obviously they do. Especially to him.

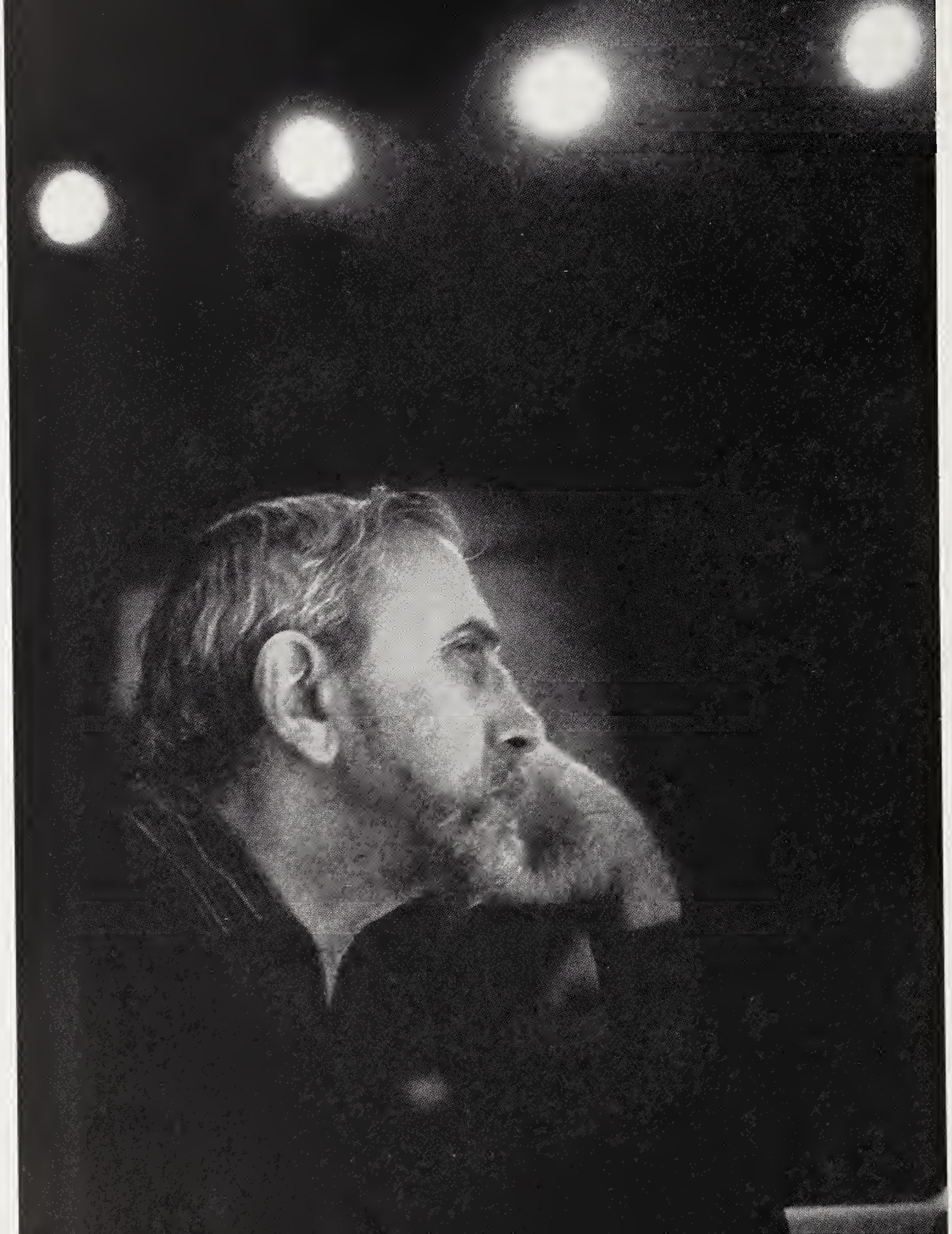
KRISHEN KHANNA



Born in 1925, Krishen Khanna studied literature at Government College, Lahore and Imperial College, Windsor, England. His works are in the collections of the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, American University, Washington University Museum of Modern Art, New York and Contemporary Art Society of Britain. He has exhibited widely in India and abroad. He has been honoured with the National Award by Lalit Kala Akademi, Fellowship of Rockefeller Council, New York and the First Triennale-India Award.

EBRAHIM ALKAZI





Ebrahim Alkazi in
a pensive mood
at the National
School of Drama

Legend is something that others make you

Grandfather of contemporary Indian theatre, director, teacher to an entire generation of theatre artistes, Ebrahim Alkazi, the founder director of the National School of Drama evoked only two kinds of response — adulation or hatred. Never having seen his work before he went into self-imposed exile in the late '70s, I had only heard about him from his contemporaries and students.

Then came the news of his return in '93. It was a homecoming in the true sense of the term, for he directed three plays for the National School of Drama Repertory Company, something that he had set up himself.

He was in the midst of rehearsals for these plays when I met him. Somehow I had expected him to be taller. Probably his towering reputation had created this pre-conceived notion about his height. Stockily built, he walked ramrod-straight and there was a gleam of acute perception in his eyes. The face was that of a well-read, intelligent man, his well-cared for hands spoke a language of their own: They rose and fell in grand gestures to stress a point. He was indeed special.

He offered me a drink. I had been warned by some of his former students that he did this to faze his students and win them over. Perhaps in those days and at that age, it may have had a deeper impact on the psyche that the director of an institution was offering a drink to his students, but he did it so naturally that it did not seem the least bit odd to me.

Putting aside his large brolly, he settled down, apologising profusely for a mere five-minute delay in keeping his appointment. But then he was the king of timing. Was his comeback timed keeping something in mind? "Not really. Time is the basis of your discipline. Things have to be done in a limited period of time. Each one has a tempo which has to be integrated and related to the creativity of others. Yet I am not so naive as not to be able to see that several people

are feeling very threatened by the arrival of the 'monster' they thought they were well rid of. If they resent my being around, so be it," he declared as he wafted back borne on the winds of heartache and controversy. Alkazi's reaction to the criticism was vitriolic: "I don't need to prove my merit as a director to anyone. This is no game of one-up-manship. If sharing one's life's experiences constitutes a threat to these young people, so be it. If they are so upset over my showing myself on a grand scale, why don't they show themselves on a grand scale?"

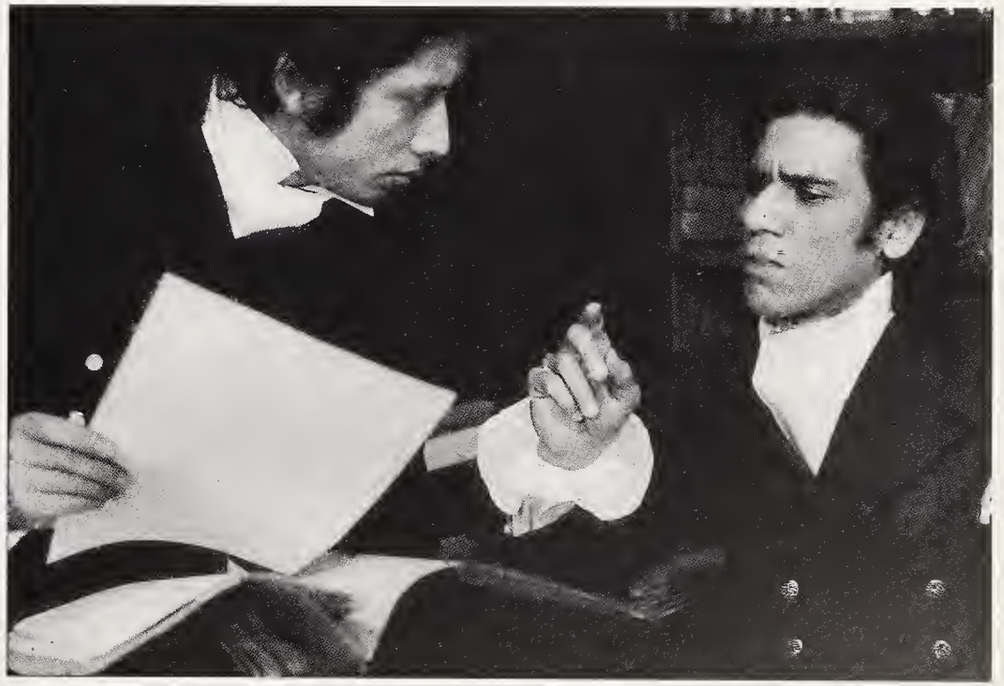
Alkazi, they say, suffers from the outdatedness of domiciles, who find it difficult to shrug off the conventions of their bygone days, wherever they may be. The demands of contemporary theatre have changed, especially gestures and voice intonation. Alkazi's epic style was a thing of the past. Audiences, too, have become accustomed to different styles of work. But then this is the stuff legends are made of — even though Alkazi shrugs off the epithet in a manner that suggests that he does not consider it unjustified. But human frailty cannot be hidden for long. "I don't think of myself as a legend. I have never referred to myself as a legend. Legend is something others make you. It is not of my making," he shrugged.

Whatever the criticism against him, the fact remains that his was the single largest contribution in the setting

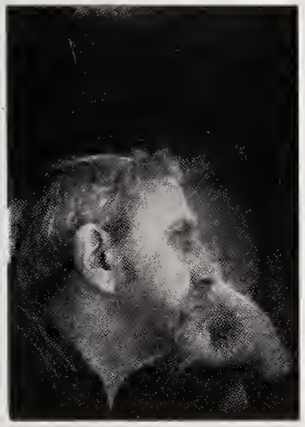
up of the National School of Drama, producing actors who have left an indelible mark not only on contemporary theatre, but have changed the course of Indian cinema as well. Be it actors like Naseeruddin Shah, Manohar Singh, Om Puri, Om Shivpuri, Anupam Kher, Surekha Sikri, Vijay Kashyap; or directors like Ratan Thiyam, Bansi Kaul, Prasanna, Bhanu Bharti and Ranjeet Kapoor — they have all inherited their share of the Alkazi magic.

The impact, negative and positive, that the man had on his students is immeasurable. Television and film actor Vijay Kashyap, of Tenali Rama fame, remembers of the time when he came to class wearing unpolished shoes. Without a word, Alkazi picked up his shoes and polished them himself. Needless to say, Kashyap has never been seen with unpolished shoes since!

On his return, actors found the veritable Bhishma Pitamah haunted by the glories of the past and living on his laurels. "It may well be that I have been out of touch and have become outmoded. So toss me into the wastepaper basket. I've never considered myself indispensable. Besides, isn't 14 years enough for them to show their worth? And what is this about this great dictator preventing all this talent and creativity from emerging? If these plays succeed, it will be absolutely thanks to my direction."



Uttara Baokar and Surekha Sikri (top) in *Biwiyon ka Madarsa* and (below) Om Puri in *Danton's Death*. (Facing page top) from *Viraasat II* and (below) from *Din Ke Andhere*



A scene (facing page) from *Rakt Kalyan*

It smacked of megalomania, I murmured. "I'm there to remove and not accept fakes. I don't live vicariously through an actor. If you are giving a lazy speech, I won't accept it. I hope I brought a kind of maturity and experience and a certain depth of thought and understanding to the field of theatre," he retorted.

There is no doubt that the NSD took enormous strides during Alkazi's tenure as the director. It was he who established high standards of teaching, faculty and production. Showing me around the terrace of his house, where he built a possible theatre space, he said: "Nothing is more painful than a tattered performance. People tend to use short cuts in sets. The demands of a creative institution are different. A specialised craftsmanship is required for theatre, just as special money needs to be set aside. It is appalling that creative institutions are equated with technical institutions," Alkazi fumed.

He ensured that teachers could expand their horizons by visiting other institutions like the Berliner Ensemble or theatre institutions in Japan and learn from their style of functioning. Interaction with actors and directors like Carl Weber and Fritz Bennewitz were organised. He built a library, the most important facility of a research institution. He put together a repertoire of Sanskrit plays that are taught in the NSD. Translations were made using students when experts were not available. In short, he created an intellectual climate for the drama school.

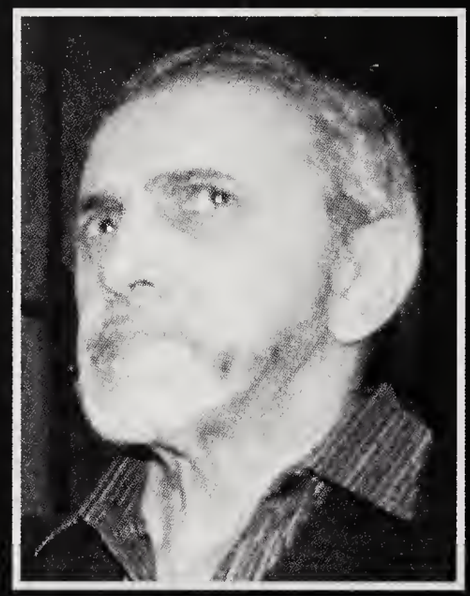
Alkazi believes, "As a matter of policy, you learn from peers. Then your range is extended to a considerable extent. The idea is to expand the potential of an actor, widen his range and reach deep into your own self. An actor is his own instrument. The experience of two to three years is hopelessly inadequate in the Indian context. For the transformation of a vague, romantic idea of theatre to a disciplined individual, you must feel like it is your life's work and have a commitment to young people."

But then why did he withdraw, both from theatre and the NSD? "Any institution that you serve is nobody's ancestral domain. I was fed up of being kicked around and being at the mercy of people who ran the institution in the bureaucracy. None of the akademis gave a damn."

He is supposed to be the great dictator. "What rot! This dictator demands that you think. He demands that you get rid of damned cliched responses," he said with his arm outstretched to include a large expanse.

Love him or hate him, ignore him you can't. Theatre people considered him infallible for so long that they refused to grant him his human weaknesses. Alkazi is Tughlaq, in a manner of speaking — the same arrogance of genius, the same hubris, the same vision of Utopia — maybe some day the Utopian dream will come true.

EBRAHIM ALKAZI



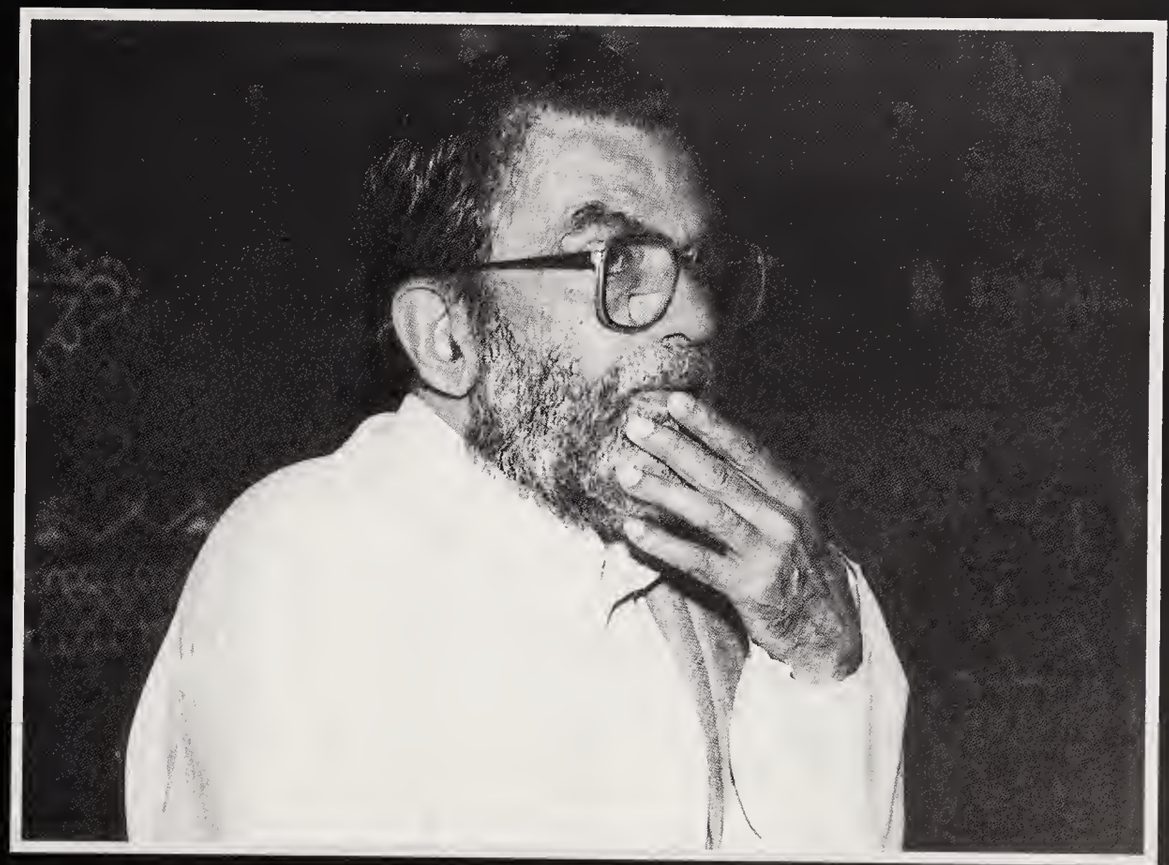
Born in 1925, Ebrahim Alkazi graduated from the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, London, in 1950. An associate of the Drama Board of Britain, he was awarded the Starred Certificate for work of outstanding merit by the British Drama League. He won the BBC broadcasting award in 1950.

He directed and produced eastern and western classical and modern plays in English and Hindi with considerable distinction. He founded the Theatre Unit's School of Dramatic Arts in Bombay as well as the National School of Drama in New Delhi.

He has made original contributions in the sphere of theatre design.

Through his journal, the Theatre Unit Bulletin, Ebrahim Alkazi promoted the cause of dramatic art. He was honoured with the Sangeet Natak Akademi award.

B V KARANTH



You can repeat riches, not poverty

The sun was still making its way into the lap of the ocean to rise afresh yet again, tomorrow. Waves of the blue-grey waters of the Malpe Beach near Udipi swirled around our feet as we stood in knee-deep water. I, notebook in hand and he, a trifle pensive and reflective. The situation of the sun was a little like theatre director B V Karanth himself. Eclipsed by the scandal of the Vibha burning case, it seemed that the sun had set, or were the old fires still burning deep and strong?

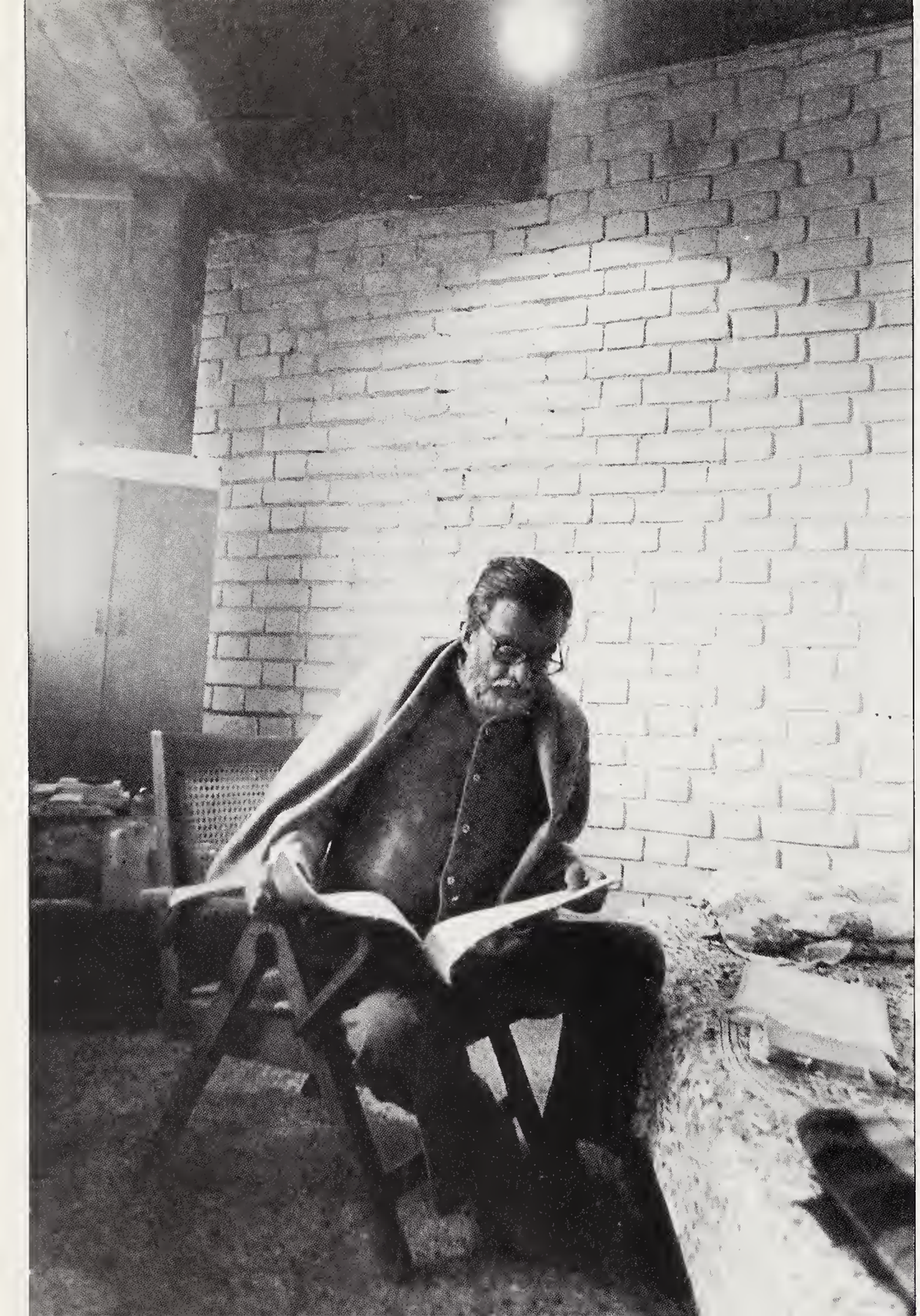
He is on home turf. South Kanara. The place where he grew up. Even today, in his late 60s, he proudly proclaims that climbing trees is like second nature to him. "Maybe not the coconut trees, but most others," he says with an impish smile.

He ran away from home at the age of 13 to join a Parsi theatre company. "My parents were so poor that they were probably happy that that night's dinner was saved," he says without rancour. But that is the way the man is. Maybe momentarily angry or even livid, but the child-like faith in human goodness emerges soon enough and the smile is back — right from the heart.

His deep association with and love for music sustained him in the company, but it was not long before he began to chafe. Intellectual stimulation was a deep need, which led him to join the Hindi Prachar Sabha. He qualified for all the examinations that he could possibly sit for. His strong grounding in the language is perhaps why he speaks such pure and Sanskritised Hindi.

I complimented him on this and he said modestly, "When I was in the north, my Kannada was getting 'ashuddh' and now it is my Hindi that is becoming impure."

Banaras was the most logical next stop as he could write his matriculation examinations in Hindi. "Besides, the Marwari school where I was teaching promised to raise my salary by five rupees if I passed. That money was important.



There was no question of not passing," he says. "You can live on an empty stomach only once. You can repeat riches but not poverty."

But B V didn't stop there. He did his Masters in Hindi and registered for his PhD in theatre, even worked on it, but never got round to submitting the thesis. His wandering spirit took him to Calcutta, where he learnt Bengali. "I didn't know a thing about their theatre, but thanks to my experience in the Parsi company, I was entrusted with most of the work," he says candidly.

It was only much later that he came to Delhi to work at the National School of Drama, and shot into national fame both as a theatre director as well as the director of the NSD. "NSD was the real test." So great was his involvement with the students' cause and their demands that one would invariably find him at the forefront of their struggles. This proved to be detrimental to his own cause as there was a great deal of unrest during the end of his tenure. "I was destined to be doomed at the NSD for I could never believe that I could be half as good as Ebrahim Alkazi," he says without a trace of self-consciousness.

He came back to Karnataka and made films with Girish Karnad. And then followed a spate of excellent films including Mimansa and Chomana Dudi. Theatre slowly receded into the background. The man who gave Tughlaq, Andher Nagri Chaupat Raja, Mudrarakshas, Vidyasunder,

Barnam Vana and Chote Saiyad Bade Saiyad new dimensions and interpretations had become a high-flying director with international recognition. "I went to five countries. I never expected to. Who would have sent me abroad? I, the quiet, morose-looking person, who was really bad at PR," he wonders, almost to himself. But it was probably his naivete that carried him through his most difficult patches. What you don't know, doesn't hurt.

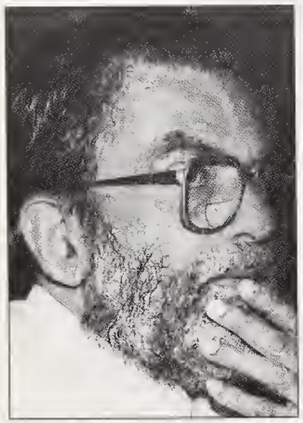
What he does not know is the heights to which he can rise. His musical scores are legendary for their earthy rhythm and haunting melodies. Once, when he was unhappy with a particular piece of music, he actually recomposed the entire sequence while the show was in progress! He proved his own contention wrong about Jaishankar Prasad's play that it could not be staged by doing it himself later. "But who can say what is the real truth?"

At the same time he is candid enough to admit that "I am like Hanuman. I can work only if people have complete faith in me, and I try not to betray their faith. I am weak. Besides, I am not thick-skinned. So I get hurt easily," he says so endearingly that it would bring out the protective instinct in the coldest of hearts.

Looking for the ultimate truth: A scene from *Avimarak* directed by Karanth

B V is obviously in a rather reflective state of mind for even as I was trying to articulate a question on the Vibha burning case, where Karanth was suspected of having set fire to Vibha, an actress of the Bhopal Rangamandal Repertory in what was called a crime of passion, he said softly on his own: "Today, May 26th, in '87 I was arrested in the burning case. In actual fact I had saved her. If I had burnt her, would she have spared me? It is difficult to convince anybody. For every logic, there is yet another equally strong logic." It is evident that the ghosts of the case still haunt him and even in his own mind he has yet to live it down.

Often accused of belonging to the Kannada lobby, Karanth says in a thoughtful tone, "the people who have understood and appreciated my work are in the north. The Kannadigas



The witchery of it: (right) A scene from *Barnam Vana,* an adaptation of *Macbeth* (below) A scene from *Chandrahaas*

have not even understood the relevance of my work. Even when the Vibha incident took place, it was people from Lucknow, Allahabad and Banaras who rallied round me."

The Vibha case was also the reason why Karanth has not accepted the directorship of his theatre group Rangayan in Mysore, but continued technically as its advisor for a few years, before resigning in '95. Rangayan offers a six-year job-oriented course in theatre — three for training and three for the repertory. The group has performed all over the country as well as abroad.

"The wanderer in me is coming to the fore again. But Rangayan is still not registered, the salaries have remained the same for five years. I have a great deal of responsibility towards its members. But I do want to spend time with my wife, Prema. For years we have not lived together for more than a few months in our long marriage."

Visionary or ....?
A scene from *Chote Saiyad Bade Saiyad* directed by Karanth

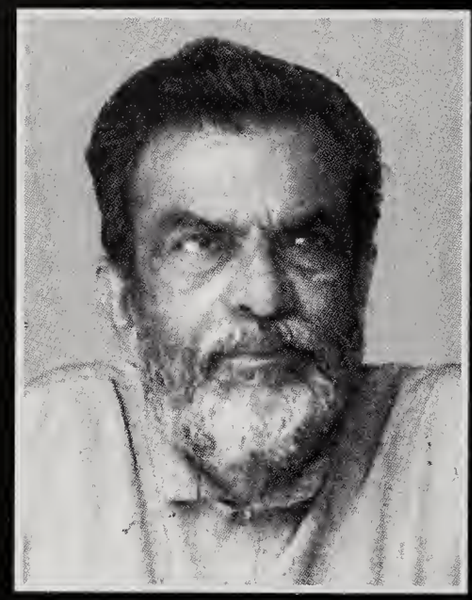
At another level, B V voices concern at his own creativity. "Sometimes I feel that my creativity is slipping, and that my creative 'srota' or source has dried up. If there are attacks on a person from one direction, he can take it, but after the Vibha case, there have been multi-pronged attacks on me — financially, socially, creatively."

He adds in a mock-serious note, "Maybe it is plain and simple old age. I actually go and congratulate people if their work is good. Earlier one was consumed by jealousy if someone did better. Age has probably taken the edge off my personality. I am becoming increasingly self-destructive and detached."

He recites a few words of a long forgotten poem: "Kal ugunga mein, aaj andhere mein hoon, Kal ugunga mein...roshni ki ek kiran ban kar, kal ugunga mein..." (Today I am in the shadow, tomorrow I will rise like a ray of light, tomorrow...)

As the sun disappeared in a blaze of gold and the surf around our feet began to swirl in a course of its own, Karanth was suddenly keen to return to his students, and the moment was broken. But not before making sure that he bought me the juicy fruits of the palmyra trees so abundant on the Malpe beach...

B V KARANTH



Born in 1928, in Karnataka, B V Karanth is an M A in Hindi. A research scholar in Indian theatre and a trained musician, he graduated from the National School of Drama in 1962, winning an award as the best all-round student. His translations from Sanskrit into Hindi include *Swapna Vasavadatta, Uttararama Charita* and *Mrichchakatikam*. He has translated a large number of plays from Kannada to Hindi and vice-versa. His major productions on stage include *Ranga Bharatha, Oedipus, Six Characters in Search of an Author, Panjara Shale, Tasher Desh, The Blue Horse and Hayavadana*. He was director of NSD from 1977 to 1981; he headed the Rangmandal at Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal from 1981 to 1988. Until 1994, he headed the Rangayan troupe in Mysore.

SHEILA BHATIA

Struggle is a positive thing

The form may be a little faded but the spirit is as vibrant as a fresh bloom, engulfing you with concern and warmth that is rare. The eyes reminisce, mist, flash, evoke the thoughts, emotions and glory of long ago. The tone and thought are philosophical from a depth which emanates from a full grasp of the situation, yet seeking contemporary relevance.

The grande dame of theatre, Sheila Bhatia dominated the field in Delhi for four decades after Independence, staying firm despite the fleeting new trends which emerged periodically, like frogs in the monsoon, only to submerge again. More often than not, she has swum against the tide. In an age when musicals were considered "out", she valiantly carried on, making the most of a meagre number of singers who could sing, act and also enunciate Urdu and Punjabi words correctly. "We don't have a voice culture," she lamented.

Defending musicals, Sheila said, "Nowhere in the world are musicals considered outdated. It is only we who feel that way — like the proverbial frog in the well — because we're not exposed to them."

She moved to musicals from staging operas, "due to the shortage of appropriate artistes. Most good actors use the stage as a stepping stone to films. Then you are back to square one — training new persons from scratch."

Besides, it is financially a losing proposition, with many constraints. "The training is rigorous and expensive, there are no music academies to give it a push... 'Apni himmat hai ki ham phir bhi jiye jate hai! — It is our courage that makes us survive," she quotes Faiz with a twinkle.

Talking about her popular production, Omar Khayyam, Sheila said: "A little bit of me has always been with Omar Khayyam, 'Main aaya kyon, aur kyon chala gaya' — the meaninglessness of life, the empty hands — have always made me feel close to him. But it is only much later that I

got an opportunity to do it on stage," she said.

She sought to correct the popular notion of Khayyam being a poet of wine and women and to highlight the multifaceted aspects of his personality — as an astronomer, astrologer, mathematician and a lover. The various levels of his growth fascinated Sheila. "When I stumbled on this novel by Lamb Herald, I knew the time had come for me to do something on Khayyam. I wrote the script in Urdu, using 27 of his 'rubaiyats', from translations by Fitzgerald, Aga Hashr Kashmiri and Aadam."

Typical of a person who grew up in pre-Partition Lahore, Sheila is comfortable in both Punjabi and Urdu.

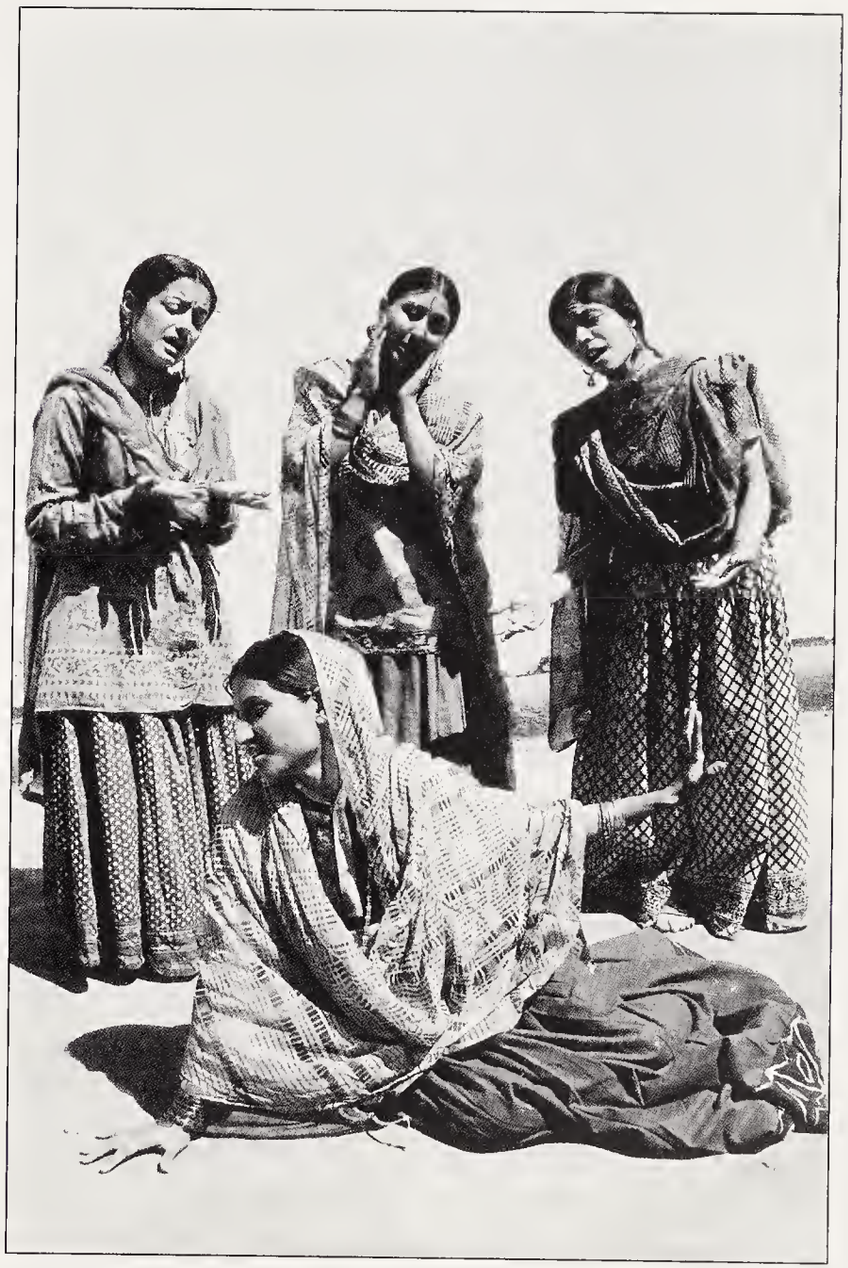
A scene from (top) *Hawa Se Hippi Tak* and (right) from *Heer Ranjha*

Refusing to pander to vulgar tastes, Sheila sought to give Punjabi culture and language the pedestal it deserves. "Once people have been exposed to our kind of theatre, they will be weaned away from cheap theatre," she firmly believed.

Urdu, too, equally dominated her long career. "I feel comfortable in both these languages. They are my life blood." But the paucity of original plays in these languages and of agencies to translate from other languages is so limiting. "I have myself published translations," she says. "But now I'm tired. I don't have the energy to run after publishers."

Her basic problem is how to reach more people. "We don't have the funds to travel all over the country. How do we reach those exposed only to the Ramlila? A theatre movement has to be built up or we'll continue to jump up and down in our self-created ponds. This movement must become an intrinsic part of our lives," she said.

"Culture cannot be bought in Mandi House," Sheila stressed. "You can't become cultured by attending a play or a concert. Culture must be an imperative part of our life and not a by-the-way thing. When we build a housing complex we plan shops, hospitals, parks, but not a cultural complex with a small library, a theatre, or an art centre. We build community centres which only become 'baratghars' for weddings. Culture has to be a part of our national perspective," she says with conviction.



Scene from *Chand Badlan Da*

"In our youth we had a great urge to do something meaningful. We seem to have lost it somewhere along the way," she says. "Yet as long as one is alive, one must continue to make the most of this fleeting life."

The force behind the National Cultural Front of Kashmir, Sheila has fond memories of the past. "I was a refugee from Sialkot and had been doing theatre in Lahore when the Partition came. When we came to Delhi, Sheikh Abdullah called us to form the NCF in Kashmir. We performed all over the valley from Srinagar to Shopian. I was the only girl in the entire group and we used to live like a family. It was a special time."

"Hali (her husband) and I have gone back to Kashmir every year in the last 40 years, to reassure ourselves of that gossamer thread that bound us. But these last couple of years we have been disappointed. There is so much hostility," said Sheila sadly. "I've lived through the Partition. I know the futility of these petty things." Communal harmony is a recurring theme in her plays.

Another is women. "Women and communal harmony are not mere fashions with me. I have tried to portray various facets of women — it is the essence of my experiences which have come on stage bit-by-bit. Women have not grown in the last five thousand years. And, after all, theatre is not isolated from reality but is an echo and a reflection of it."

Sheila's plays usually tilt towards the folk. She has imparted a certain sophistication to the idiom, retaining its essential character and flavour. "Tradition has to be taken forward or else it will stop being folk," Sheila maintained.

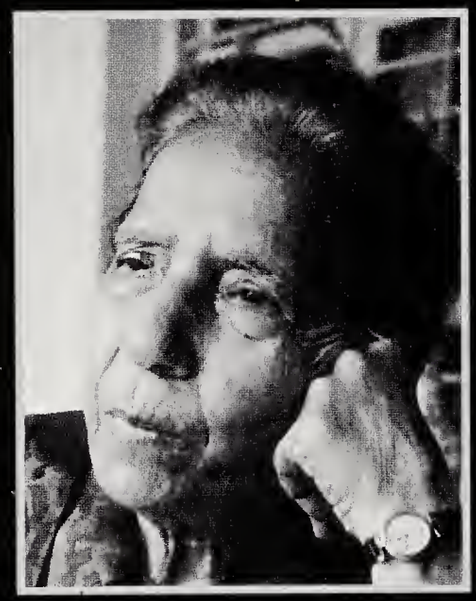
In several of her productions like Chand Badlan Da, Dard Aayega Dabe Paon and Ghalib Kaun Hai, she translated the folk heritage into dramatic form.

Sheila lamented the fact that it was increasingly difficult to do theatre in the present scenario, with "the lack of discipline and values, the crippling expense of hiring halls, costumes, publicity, and a public unwilling to pay. We need to build an audience which pays for its theatre and is not the free card-collecting type." She also decried the over-influence of television in our lives. "Now all our cultural doses are through television," she shrugged. "But like many other things, I don't know when these concentric circles will unravel."

Yet, her struggle for theatre continues. "Struggle has always interested me — whether we succumb or emerge victorious is immaterial, but struggle is a positive thing." Looking at her life, who would not agree?

A scene (top) from *Yasmin* with Raj Babbar as the protagonist and (below) from *Nadir Shah*

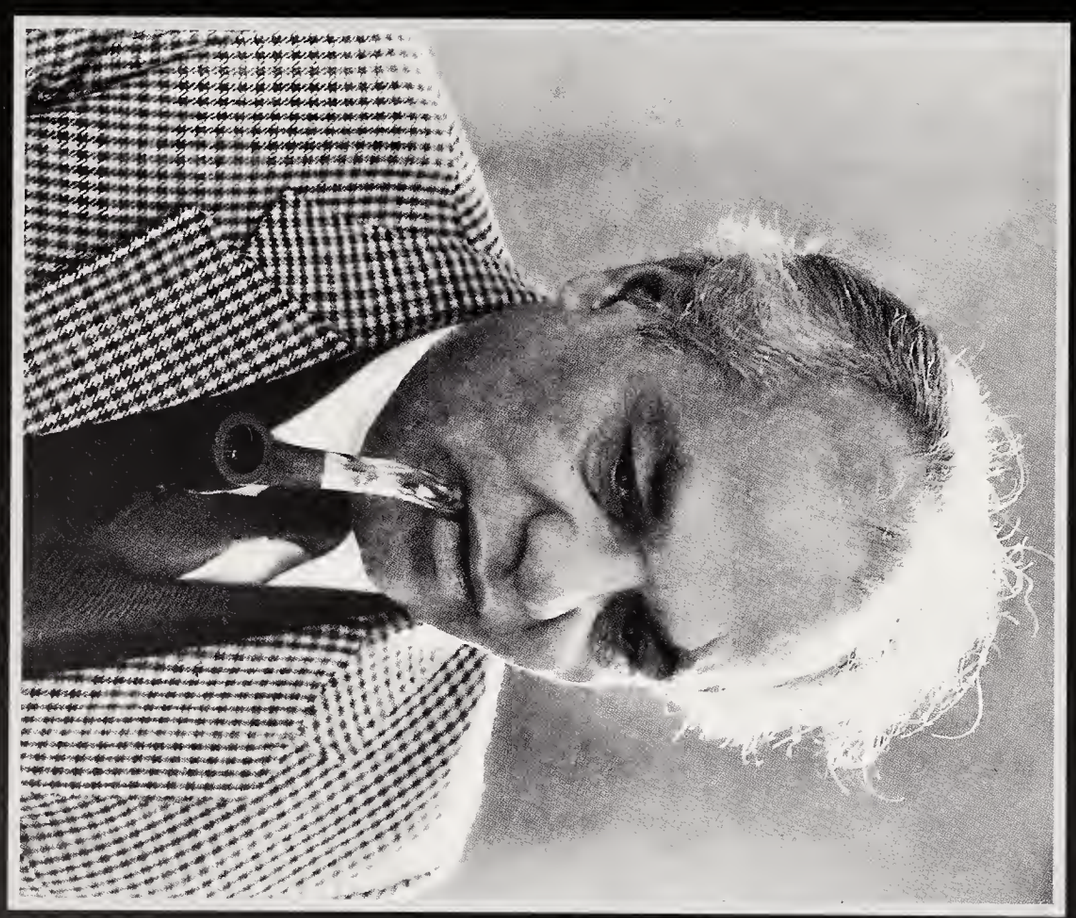
SHEILA BHATIA

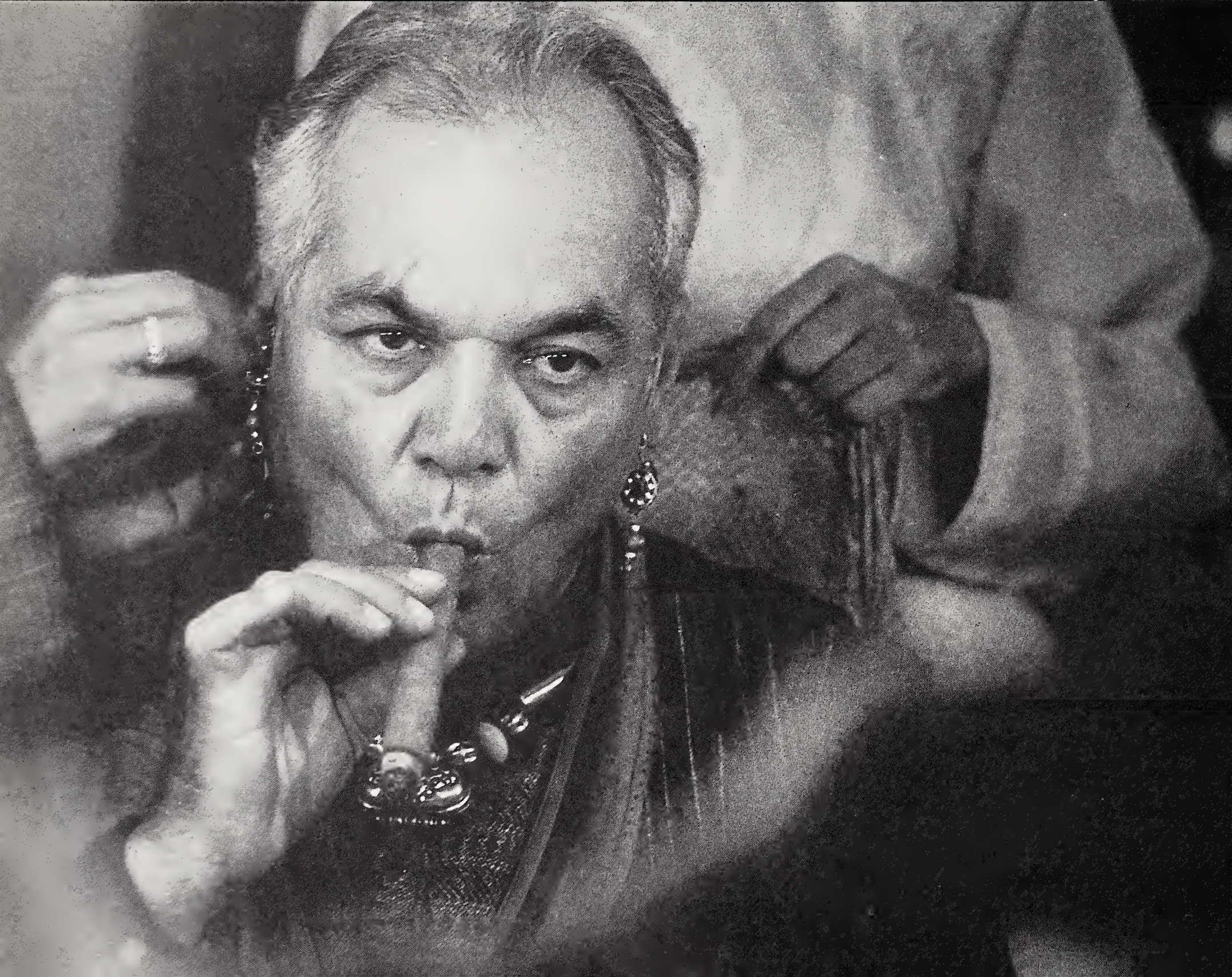


Sheila Bhatia has been actively associated with the theatre movement from pre-Partition days. She is a playwright, composer and director. She has about 100 major productions to her credit and is known for her innovative and experimental musical plays in three languages: Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu. From the time her first musical play *Call of the Valley* was staged 45 years ago, her's has been a continuous effort to find new and meaningful forms and themes.

She is the recipient of many awards and honours including the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award and the Padma Shree. Founder of The Delhi Art Theatre, she is presently its director.

MANOHAR SINGH





Does a creative man have fewer needs?

To film buffs, he is the ambitious and scheming press baron of Main Azad Hoon; to television audiences, he is the arrogant thakur of Raag Darbari; to theatre lovers, he is Tughlaq, King Lear, Mukhya Mantri and Bade Saiyad. Manohar Singh, the actor, is all this and more. The depth of his understanding of mankind is phenomenal, adding to the vast store of words and gestures of the characters he has played and will play in the future.

He is grave and dignified, and imbued with a quiet intensity. The gestures are grand, as is the manner of speech — each word and thought expressed in exact and measured tones.

Epitome of courage: Manohar Singh (facing page) in *Himmat Mai*, an adaptation of *Mother Courage*

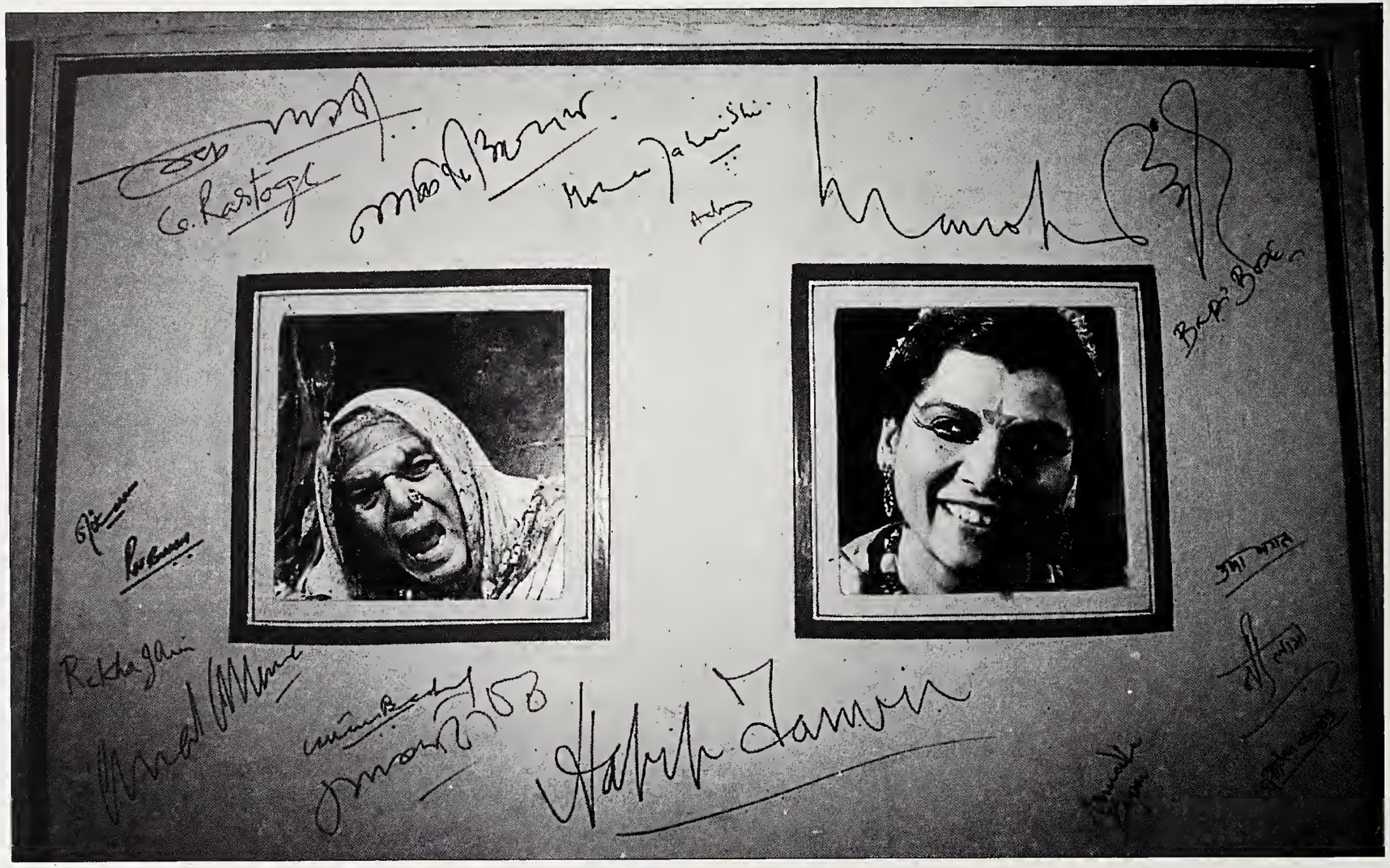
Essentially a theatre artiste, the former chief of the National School of Drama Repertory Company is now more often seen on the big and small screen. And those who have seen his sterling performances on stage are clearly unhappy at this transition.

Why the stereotype thakur, minister, zamindar rut, they ask. Where is the man who was Tughlaq and Lear?

"Who will give me a Tughlaq or a Lear in films?" he asks almost angrily. "Theatre is a labour of love, not a commercial proposition. And who says one cannot get typecast in parallel cinema? It is happening to the best of the lot. And the so-called art cinema or middle-cinema is few and far between." But surely the lure of lucre is not an overriding factor in an artiste as creative as him?

"Why not? Does a creative man have fewer needs? Do rents cost him less? Is food given to him on a discount? In fact artistes lead a rather erratic life, so the expenditure is more than the average nine-to-five worker.

"Everyone has needs and priorities. Today, my priority is my family, my house, my children. I have given a number of years to the stage. It is time I did something for my family.



Sharing the limelight (top) with Uttara Baokar at a Natrang exhibition. Manohar Singh (facing page) as *Tughlaq* at Purana Quila and (top right) another scene from the play

So why pass a value judgment on me and declare me guilty?" he asks disarmingly.

A student of the redoubtable, albeit formidable, Ebrahim Alkazi, the National School of Drama alumnus is glad that a lot more options have opened for theatre people now.

"In our time there was only the Drama Division and that too was not open to actors or producers but managers, and if you were very lucky, a post in the NSD repertory. A career as a professional stage artiste meant long years of starvation, debts, obscurity, ignominy and ultimately lots of cynicism. But today there are so many avenues — teaching, films, advertising and television. And perhaps the best thing that has happened to theatre is larger audiences. More grants are being given. I'm not saying all is well, a lot more needs to be done."

Manohar believes that professional theatre will never come of age until money is pumped in on a regular basis. "If there is money, the rest of the problems like lack of rehearsal space and high theatre rentals are all surmountable. And why only one NSD? Why not a dozen repertory companies all over the country, which get sustained patronage and proper finances?" he asks.

Sharply flaying those who use theatre as a mere stepping stone to films and television, Manohar says theatre is a very intimate and special medium and should be treated as such.

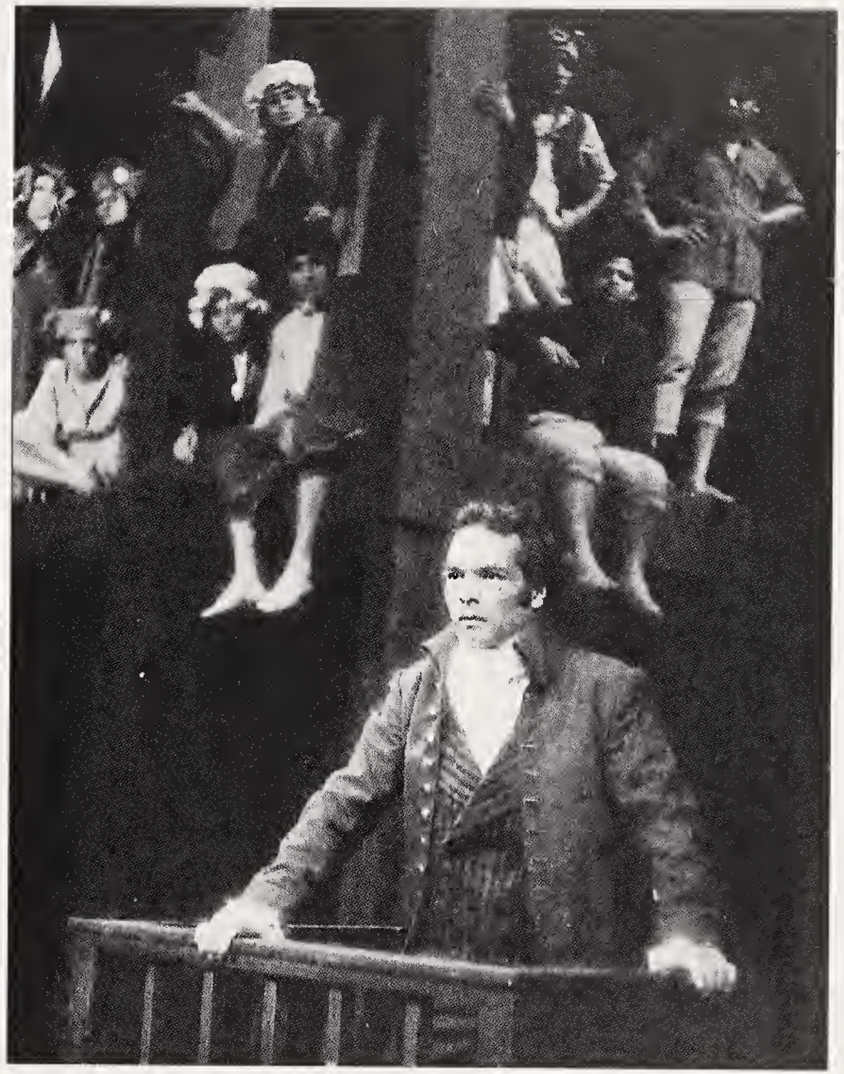
Unlike his peer group, he has a philosophical view of the mass exodus from stage to television. "Television is sure-

shot money. You finish your work and the money is ready. It gives a number of actors the much-needed money to live on and often that money is used for staging plays," he says.

He remarks that most of today's Hindi theatre in Delhi is reaping what the NSD repertory sowed in his time. "We created that audience and they are cashing in on it. There were days when we used to perform to a house of 20-30 people and that too comprising mostly our families and friends, with rows of empty seats gaping at us. Now there are shows which are actually sold out weeks in advance! This was unheard of a decade back," he says almost wistfully.

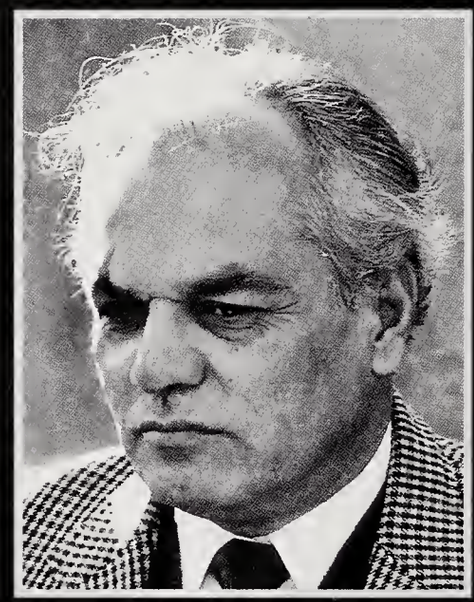
Acting full-time on stage since '62, Manohar made the shift to the screen in '85. It was by no means an easy transition. "I was used to louder histrionics, but the camera is all-seeing. I had to learn to be more subtle. I had to express with one fleeting look what I would have used my entire body for on stage. Also, film is a more painstaking medium as one has to do a number of shots and sometimes the continuity gets broken."

Today, Manohar regrets that he is unable to do as much theatre as he would like to. "I feel guilty sometimes. Often, even if one is willing, the other actors are too busy doing films or television. But from now on I intend to keep aside time only for the stage — after all, it is my first love," he says with a twinkle.



As *Mukhya Mantri* (facing page) with Surekha Sikri and K K Raina. (Top) from *Danton's Death*

MANOHAR SINGH



Born in Simla, Manohar Singh joined the Himachal Pradesh state drama troupe in 1962. He joined the National School of Drama in 1968 and distinguished himself as an actor of great versatility. In 1971, he joined the School's Repertory Company and played leading roles in over 50 major productions. He was head of the NSD Repertory Company.

He was attached to the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1975 while on a British Council scholarship. In 1982, he led the Repertory Company on an extensive tour of East Germany, Poland and Britain for the Festival of India. He has received the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for Acting.

YAMINI KRISHNAMURTI

Happiness is like the dawn...

She is one of those rare people who was just born to dance. Statuesque and tall, with a graceful gait, evocative almond shaped eyes and long, artistic fingers, what she can express with the lift of the eyebrow or the twitch of a finger, other dancers take an entire evening to say! Yamini Krishnamurti is special not only for her own stunning performances, but also for the influence she has had on an entire generation of Bharatanatyam dancers.

Pieces performed by her have established a standard that other dancers have had to measure up to. More often than not, they have ended up being merely poor clones. Yamini says matter-of-factly, "Everyone is different. What works for me, may not necessarily work for others."

There is a passionate sensuality to her dance which is an intrinsic aspect of her personality. For she is an intense person, loving or hating with equal intensity. "Why do you love? You can love a stupid stone! A stone becomes lovable for its mind is not crooked. A mind can be very corrupt. Why can't we be happy without greedy achievement? Why this cause and effect? Even hatred is an intensity. Some people don't even experience that. A concentrated affair is a tough job — you can't be without the end result," she says a trifle sadly. Her conversation and laughter are frequent — like a child's. When she speaks of the mundane, it could very well be interpreted to mean the philosophical rather like the poetry of the Bhakti movement.

"The moment the mind is at rest, we bring trouble upon ourselves. There is so much pollution of the minds. We don't stop and think about what is really essential. There is so much insecurity. There are so many bad vibes floating around," she says. "While information is increasing, inspiration is decreasing. An adventurous spirit is an absolute must. I pray to God to give me inspiration," she says humbly.

The old adage about genius being ninety nine per cent perspiration and one percent inspiration may well be debatable, but when inspiration does come, how often do we recognise it? Or, for that matter, channelise it? Perhaps

Carrying on the tradition : Yamini with her students

it is this ability to channelise that sets the genius apart.

The ephemeral nature of dance and the dancer's short career span makes the journey into Indian classical dance a rather difficult one. And, unlike Western dance where choreographies are carried forward, Indian classical dance has no such precedent. Maybe it has something to do with the personalised nature of our forms. What is carried forward is the tradition which, like a flowing river, absorbs various influences as it flows.

One of the main streams that has joined the river to strengthen its currents is the temple. The temple was almost inseparable from dance at one point of time and yet, each went its separate way when the proscenium came along and monopolised one of them. Once separated, like parallel lines, the twain never met. It was an attempt to bring the two together that impelled Yamini to make a television serial entitled Natyamurti, featuring classical dance interpretations of gods and goddesses against a temple backdrop.

The episodes were set in ancient temples all over the country, with dances performed and choreographed by Yamini in honour of the main deity of each temple. In the films, as the camera zoomed in on the temple structure, a succinct commentary explained the significance of the sculptures, architecture and rituals and gave a short history of the place.

"This was my way of paying homage to all those places which left a deep impact on me. When I used to dance anywhere in the country, I used to make notes on the place. Among those were a few places where I wished I had been able to dance. In that sense this is like wish-fulfilment," said Yamini.

She even danced inside what was once the sanctum sanctorum. "The outside was so ugly as compared to the peace inside. Centuries of prayers and the aura of generations of devotees seemed to have become a part of the very walls. It was an intense experience," she says.

In various avatars : (below) Yamini in the serial Natyamurti and (right) in the 70s

Born a Vaishnavite, her fascination with the Shaivite cults was evident. "I have long been involved with the Lord of dance. His 'stutis' have rung in my ears ever since I can remember. I know each nook and cranny of the Chidambaram temple, where I spent my early years. Shiva has become an inseparable part of me," says Yamini. One of the episodes of the serial explored the concept of Ardhanarishwar (half male and half female) in a most telling manner.

Yamini herself put in months of research. To find the appropriate passages from ancient manuscripts to choreograph

fifty-sixty dance pieces, with new 'jatis' in not-so-popular ragas, and that too without the benefits of a proscenium, was not an easy job.

But Yamini's willingness to swim against the tide to explore new vistas gave her strength to go forward this time as well. This is not to say that all was smooth sailing. The new medium took its toll. "We used to get up at two am for the hair styling and make-up, just to catch the morning sun. Then we had to lug all the costumes with us as we never could be sure what colour the sky and sun would be." After all this, there were times when the temple priests would not let them shoot, saying that they would interrupt the deity's rituals.

In other temples there were frequent obstacles as some temples are mutts, held in private trust, run by local governments, or under the purview of the Archaeological Survey of India. "The chowkidars would come to shoo us away at 5 pm just when the sun's rays were right for the shoot. Then would start an endless round of cajoling, pleading to be allowed to continue for five minutes, which of course would stretch to 25. If that did not work, one of the crew members would engage the chap in a verbal duel — we had perfected the art! All the while the shoot would continue. I could hear the raised voices as I danced," she recalled with a smile.

The danseuse is totally involved with the "tremendous artistry of rituals, which is perhaps why I am a dancer!" she laughs. "When people come to see a performance, they live in a make-believe world for three hours, and unless you believe in it yourself, you'll never be able to transmit it and share it with the audience. And those who are superficial will never really know the joy of creativity. Even in art they are so prosaic that they don't go beyond, take a risk, make that extra effort. Vitality is

so important: Be disorganised, but do something."

Openly critical of critics, she said, "Critics are misusing their pens and the power that comes with it. They are helping neither the readers nor the artistes. Vicious to the core, they have a limited vocabulary. Why do they forget that their job is more responsible than the gurus? If they are not responsible, it amounts to condemning without hearing. Is it not basic injustice?" she asks.

Perhaps this hollowness within the art world has impelled Yamini to walk alone. "There is tremendous dullness in the art world. It is not fulfilling. There is no 'tripti' or satisfaction. My contemporaries who praise me to my face, bitch about me and backbite the moment my back is turned. They cannot help it, they have not learned any other tactic of survival. Earlier at least, people were honest enough to abuse you to your face," she says with a shrug.

Her conviction that honesty is the first step to happiness is amply evident in her lifestyle. "Happiness should be like the dawn, the stars and the sheer joy of being alive. Either you have it or you don't..."

Elaborating a mudra
for her students

YAMINI KRISHNAMURTI

Yamini Krishnamurti was born at Bangalore in a family of scholars. She had her early training in Bharatanatyam at Kalakshetra in Madras under Rukmini Devi Arundale. As a Government of India scholar, she had further training under the late Vidwan Elappa Pillai of Kancheepuram.

She has been in the forefront of the Bharatanatyam scene and has been appointed the Asthana Nartaki of the temple of Shri Venkateswara at Tirupati.

She is a well-known exponent of Kuchipudi dance and has contributed articles on various aspects of dance traditions to leading journals. She has founded a school in New Delhi to teach Bharatanatyam.

She is a recipient of the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award and the Padma Shree.

BIRJU MAHARAJ

It needs a Shiva to contain the Ganga

here he was on stage:This stocky, even paunchy man whose build suggests a waddle till he surprises you with quick-silver yet sinuous grace that has become his signature. In the past four decades, ever since he started training pupils at the age of 16, Birju Maharaj, the Kathak maestro, has built up a reputation so formidable that every performance is viewed by many with both wonder and a sinking feeling: When he goes, as he certainly will, who will carry forward the tradition of this dance form which he has refined and polished to a peak.

Birju Maharaj is at that stage in life when critics begin to look for, and do not see, heirs and heiresses. Inevitably, questions of legatical propriety are raised, as they were with the late Kumar Gandharva: Has the artiste's ego led him to ignore a second line of defence, a school of legatees who will keep his work alive after he has gone?

Genius cannot be taught but aesthetics can. Birju Maharaj is in his 50s in the last decade of this century and, as is evident to regulars of the Kathak scene, not one of his students or members of his family has approached his finesse, his acumen, the ease of telling the 'katha' or story from which the dance form gets its name.

"Main bant gaya hoon bees logon mein. Meri kaya simat nahin pa rahi hai ek mein — bartan chchota hai. Koi Shiv paida ho to Ganga ko roke." (My art has been distributed among 20 people. The vessel is too small to contain me in my entirety. A Shiva has to be born to contain the Ganga from submerging the world"). These are words that, out of context, you could attribute to self-importance verging on megalomania. But Birju Maharaj has the simplicity of refinement. "This is not something of his making," says Rashmi Vajpeyi, one of his earliest students who now has her own dance troupe. "This has happened thanks to the absence of other gurus of his stature."

Sahitya, or the literary element so essential to all works of art, has to be taught, but Birju Maharaj's grasp of historical reference is instinctive. A similar understanding has not been passed down to his students or family, but, says one of his students, "It is their problem if they cannot get out of Maharaj's influence to explore their own aesthetic needs."

Nevertheless, his array of successful disciples is remarkable: Kumudini Lakhia, Shovana Narain and Uma Sharma in the early '60s, Veronique Azan, Aditi Mangaldas and Saswati Sen in recent times. Over the past 35 years, in fact, he has taught over 120 dancers and danseuses, from India and from the US, France, China, Iran, Pakistan, the West Indies, Australia, Canada, Nepal, Surinam, Mauritius, Trinidad, Tobago, Guyana and Argentina.

This supervisory and supportive umbrella has occasionally come in for flak, both from disaffected students and professional detractors. Ram Mohan, his disciple and his uncle Shambhu Maharaj's son, whose performances bear an uncanny resemblance to the master's 'andaaz,' fled to the traditional safety of Lucknow, the home base of the gharana, feeling that he had been discriminated against. He had to return to the fold when he discovered that the avenues for growth in Lucknow were limited. Much of Ram Mohan's polish comes from incessantly watching videos of Birju Maharaj's performances.

Kathak is easy to comprehend and it is by far the most

Hands that say it all: The maestro demonstrates details of Kathak hastaks.

In the footsteps of the guru: Birju Maharaj showing the way to his students

popular of the classical dance forms. Considering the threshold at which it is today, the likelihood of it degenerating by playing to the gallery is great. As a thesis on the maestro and his impact on the dance form, by Keshav Kothari, former director of Kathak Kendra and a trained dancer himself, shows, "the students' socio-economic profile leads one to believe that members of the middle and lower-middle classes are more likely to take to dancing as a profession." But, their financial concerns are bound to affect the aesthetics of the art.

"The patrons have changed and as the connoisseurs are now the general public, the most popular will get the most performances," said Jeevan Pani, another former director of the Kathak Kendra and an eminent dance scholar.

"Chakkar pe chakkar lagate hain," he says, referring to the pirouettes, the number of which fetch the performer public adulation. Birju Maharaj has himself flayed this tendency to overdo what is only a part of the dance in order to please a lay audience. According to him, the subtle nuances of the form are being sacrificed to exhibitions of dexterity.

Over the years, the master's disciples have increased in number but, as he confesses himself, the dance has lost out in form and measure. The Lucknow gharana has come to dominate the field to such an extent that students and performers of the rival Jaipur and Banaras gharanas acknowledge in private that they have to acquiesce to Birju Maharaj's personal 'andaaz' or style to keep afloat. In public, however, pride demands that they profess unshakeable loyalty to their particular gharanas, even if the questionable sensibilities of populism have made them redundant.

Birju Maharaj's metier lies in his establishing as an inalienable aesthetic right the individual interpretation that now characterises Kathak's "open-endedness". The

other irreversible aspect that he has introduced is the full audience participation that lends Kathak its charm. But dance audiences used to the stolid, pre-arranged continuity of other classical dances hold the open-ended quality of a Kathak performance as incongruous to its dignity. Even this individualism has not been inculcated by his students.

Nor has Birju Maharaj's artistic integration: He is dancer, choreographer, singer, composer, percussionist and lyricist rolled into one. The tradition of Kathak demands that a performer be able to switch from role to role; but the tendency these days to narrow specialisation in dance alone, to the exclusion of other inter-linked arts, may spell the ruin of Kathak as Birju Maharaj has made it: A composite discipline capable of dazzling solo performances.

But something not even the master has been able to do is return Kathak to its pre-Mughal origins. Lucknow, the seat of the Awadh empire, in any case ensured that Kathak would dilute its origins with a hefty dose of Mughal court culture. His contribution lies in his distinctive, precise 'diagonal line movement' and its varied configurations, and in the stances and postures when ending a piece at the 'sama' or the point of its consummation or resolution.

Some of these techniques have become mandatory and, in consequence, outside the ownership and repertory of any particular gharana. His 'anga' has become universal. He has lost proprietorship over it so completely that it is now in the public domain, a part of the collective aesthetic consciousness.

A fall-out of this involuntary generosity has been that now Birju Maharaj dictates what is value-positive and what isn't. Says a critic, "Even if we were to see something daringly different by someone other than Birju Maharaj, in all likelihood its import would pass us by. He has become the matrix through which all that has to do with Kathak must pass."

The man is the institution. He is in the position occupied by Rukmini Devi Arundale in Kalakshetra and Tagore in Shantiniketan: Indispensable. Whether such a central and iconic existence is good for the dance form is a moot question. Both Kalakshetra and Shantiniketan are now shadows of their former selves.

To paraphrase W B Yeats: What is more important, the dancer or the dance?

BIRJU MAHARAJ

Born in 1937, Brij Mohan Misra, popularly known as Birju Maharaj is son of the great Achhan Maharaj. Exponent of the Lucknow school of Kathak, he began his formal training in the dance form at the age of seven, first under his father and then under his uncles Shambhu Maharaj and Lacchu Maharaj. He left Lucknow at the age of fifteen and since then he has been teaching in Delhi. For some years he was on the staff of the Bharatiya Kala Kendra, New Delhi, both as a Kathak teacher and director of the Ballet Unit. He is presently associated with the Kathak Kendra New Delhi.

Apart from being an outstanding Kathak virtuoso, he has several Kathak ballets to his credit.

He was honoured with the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award as well as the Padma Shree.

KELUCHARAN MAHAPATRA

My body is my canvas

He hails from a family of traditional painters. He too paints. Except that his body is his brush and his eyes his colours. Kelucharan Mahapatra: Dancer; guru to an entire generation of Odissi dancers; part of the revival movement of Indian classical dance in the '50s; presently involved in pioneering work in codifying names and sorting out notations of the dance form.

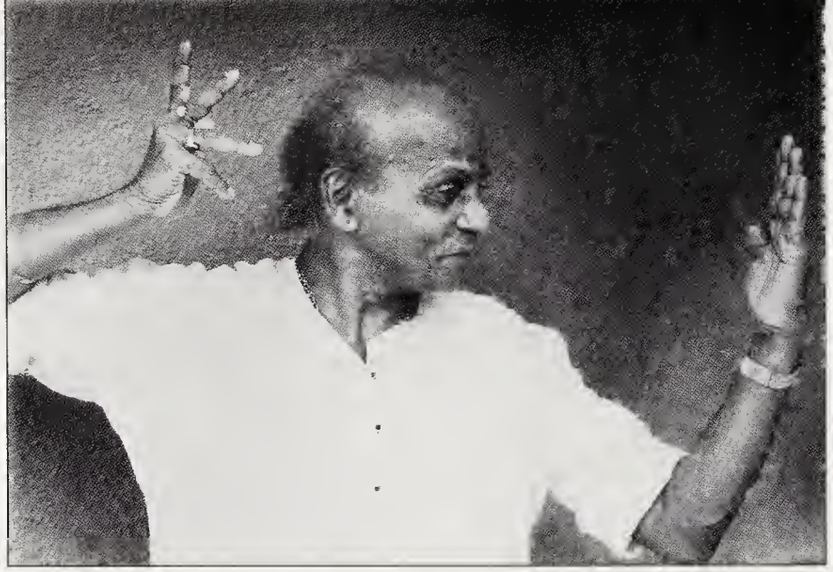
Softspoken and unassuming, he is not a person one would look at twice — until he starts dancing. Then he is a man transformed. When he dances a 'prasang' or an episode from Radha or Krishna 'leela', it is easy to forget that he is an ordinary-looking man. For that moment, what one sees is a virtual incarnation of the divine. For, to him, dance is the 'prasad' — gift — of Lord Jagannath.

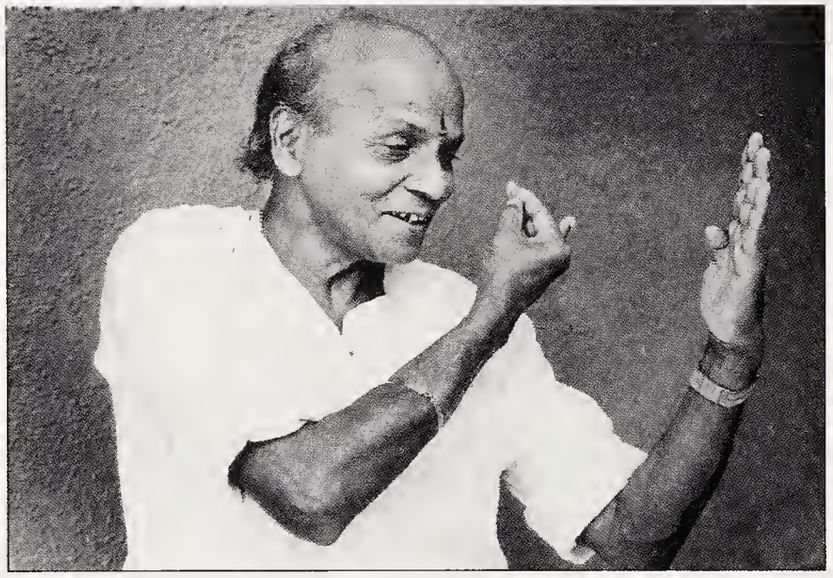
Sitting in a hotel in Madras, he seems at peace with himself and his art. In the evening he has to play the pakhawaj for one of his students and has travelled through the night from Orissa to make it in time for the recital, after having missed his train — he forgot the day he was to actually travel!

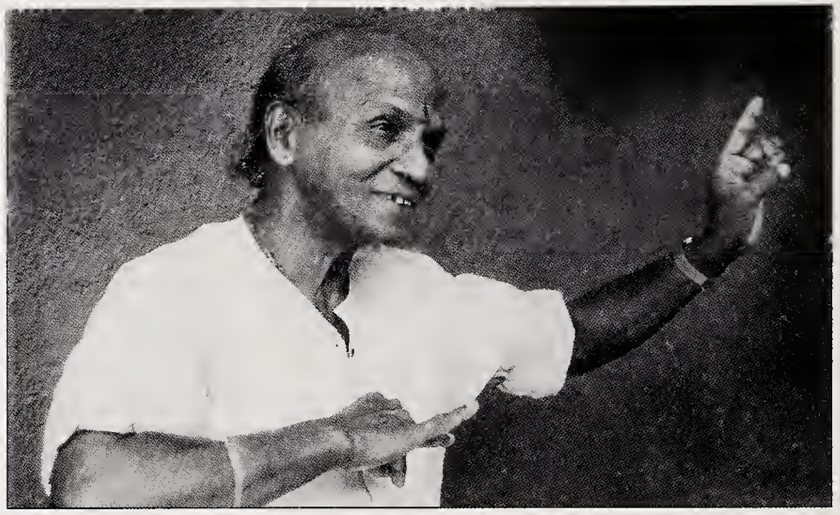
His has been an eventful, if arduous, life. At 68 and still performing, he stands on the threshold where he can look both forward with hope as well as back with a certain amount of nostalgia. Today, he seems a trifle pensive.

Memories of childhood come flooding back: "As a child, I remember when my father used to paint the Jagannath 'pattichitra', I would be assigned the job of filling in tiny dots of the ocean. Painting was something one did for a lark in between playing with friends in the mango grove. My father never insisted I paint — I painted only if I felt like it. Which was not often!"

Even at that young age, Kelubabu was more interested in playing the mridang than painting. "But I could play only seasonally during the Puja. It was during one such time that I came in contact with a Gotipua troupe. I became so







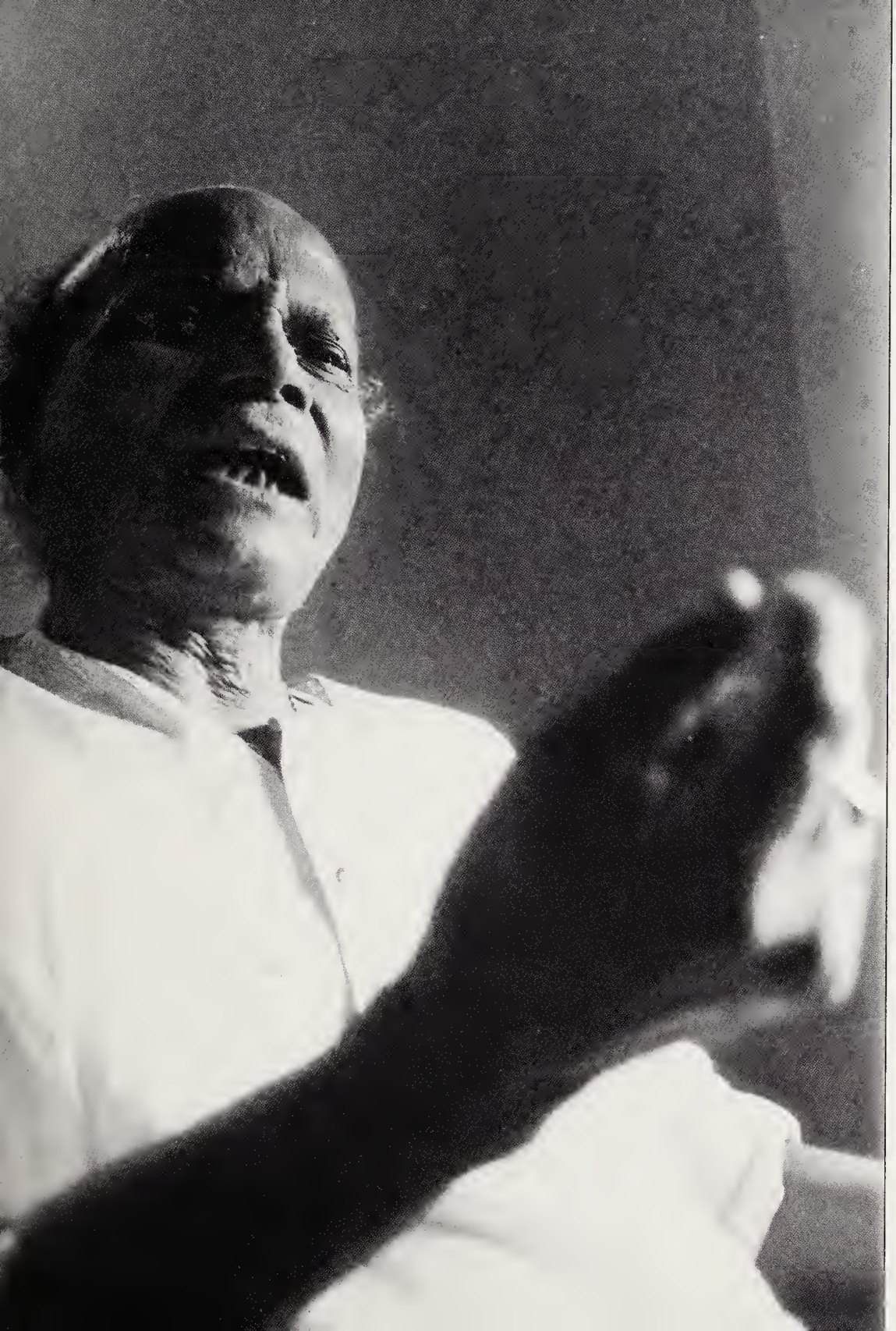
restless that at no point could I remain in the house without dancing. Without telling anyone in the family, I started learning. After I had learnt for three years, my guru thought I was ready to perform. He told my father that I must perform at the Devi puja. My father was totally taken aback!" he recalls.

This is not to say that the patriarch was against dancing per se. That was the time when Gotipua dance was losing its classical purity as folk elements were creeping into it. "My father was very upset because he didn't approve of effeminate stances like dancing with a veil, etc. He made me join a raas company of Mohan Sundar and Deb Goswami. This company emphasised 'abhinaya', or emoting with facial expressions, and singing poetry about Radha and Krishna themes."

This grounding perhaps explains the strong empathy Kelubabu has with Lord Krishna and his escapades. But the tribulations he went through to follow the dictates of his emotion would have fazed many. Kelubabu's voice grows softer as he recounts his dramatic entry into dancing as a vocation — passion it always was.

"While I was still in the raas company, my father died. I returned to my village. My brother had gambled away the

Many faces of shringara demonstrated by Kelucharan



land and I had to support my mother and sister. I was left with no option but to work on a 'paan' farm as a labourer. Here I had to fill 120 pitchers of water and climb 20 steps to pour each pitcher-full into the plantation. For this I was paid 20 paise as wages per day. At that time, a kilo of rice cost 14 paise. The only diversion I had was to occasionally sing and dance at the sangeet sabha in the evenings.

"One day I was carrying on with my routine, and I thought to myself, why did God give me a knowledge of the arts if filling water was my lot? I started crying while continuing to fill the water. All this while, the landlord was watching me and keeping a count of the number of times I had poured water. In sheer depression, I had watered the plants 140 times! At the end of the day, he took me home.

"He brought out a pakhawaj and started playing, asking me to sing. He was so happy with my singing that he gave me 120 rupees, telling me that since he had paid for so many days of my labour, I was not to work in the fields, but only sing or work in a Gotipua troupe. And when the money ran out, I was to come back to him."

Even Kelubabu's mother did not believe him when he took the money to her. "She accused me of having stolen the money and dragged me to the landlord's house in the middle of the night to confirm my story!" says the maestro, smiling in recollection.

Within a week of this dramatic episode, a 'karn mantra' guru who sang from religious texts came to their house. He took young Kelu to Cuttack to sing Harinaam for a month. "You know what he offered to pay? A mind-boggling Rs 300. I immediately went. I sang there for a month and when the time came to leave, they paid me Rs 1001 instead of Rs 300," he recounts with evident pride.

By then the journey had begun in earnest. Three months before Independence, a breakaway faction of this group led by Pankaj Charan Das started the Annapoorna Theatre and lured him away.

"It was here that I met the woman I later married. We were doing Mohini Bhasmasur. I was enacting Lord Shiva's role and Lakshmi Priya was playing Mohini. There was fierce competition between us. I was very self-conscious about the fact that I was a village bumpkin Gotipua dancer and here I was in this big city. I knew how to play the pakhawaj and could dance but I was so embarrassed. At the same time, I was intensely jealous of my co-actor. But slowly that jealousy turned into love and we got married," he says with a twinkle.

Around this time Kelubabu was on the road to donning the most important mantle — that of a guru. For being a guru takes a lot more than being a performer. As a pre-requisite, it demands the submerging of the ego — something increasingly fewer people can do. "Three years after Independence Sanjukta's (Panigrahi) mother came to me saying that she wanted her daughter to learn dance from me," he says.

A string of other disciples followed: Sonal Mansingh, Madhvi Mudgal, Kum Kum Mohanty, to name a few.

For a while he even taught Protima Bedi and at her institution Nrityagram in Karnataka. His acceptance of her as a student was rather dramatic. "I met her in Bombay after a performance. She was dressed in a very revealing outfit, blowing cigarette smoke. She asked me whether I would teach her.

"I looked her up and down and told her to throw the cigarette and wear a saree the way it is worn for dance practice and then come to me. She came the next day. After she got some 'khazana' — treasure — of the art, she asked me what she could do for it. I told her to open an institution. But she is still begging for funds," says the mild man disapprovingly.

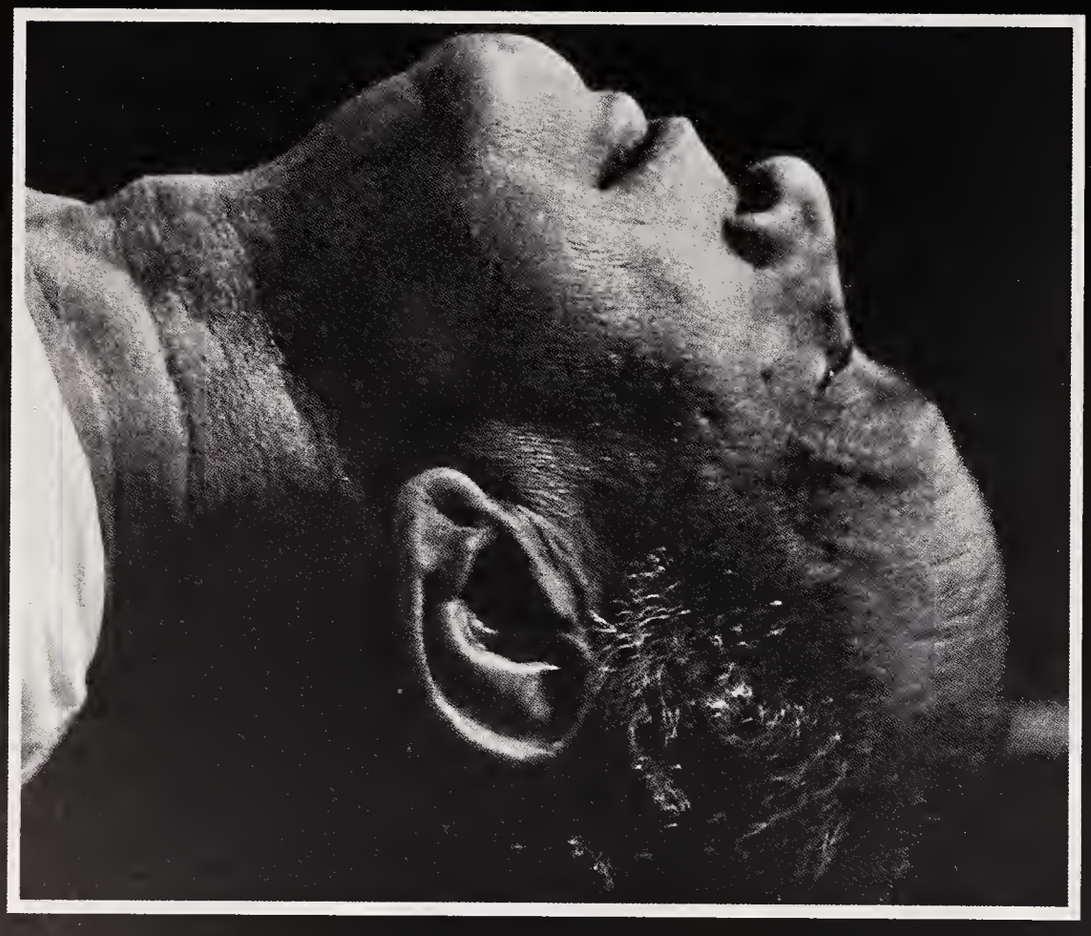
One of the most important pivots of the dance revival of the '50s, interestingly enough, Kelubabu started performing on the concert stage as late as the '70s. At this point, his concerns are more academic. "I want to identify and codify the 'ang' of the style. I want to find the pure 'ang' from pain-ting, temple sculpture, poetry and bring about an amalgamation of the word, body and music. The seed exists, it is up to us to make it into a tree," says the rare guru.

KELUCHARAN MAHAPATRA

Born in 1929 in the village of Rahurahpur in the Puri district of Orissa, Kelucharan Mahapatra is the foremost guru of Odissi dance today. Early in life he joined the Raslila troupe of Mohan Sunder Dev Goswami. Later at Annapurna Theatre, Cuttack, he was groomed as a dancer by Pankaj Charan Das and Dayal Saran. He also mastered various percussion instruments, especially the pakhawaj, learning from Agadhu Moharana, Khetra Mohan Kar and Harihar Rao. Kelucharan Mahapatra joined Kala Vikash Kendra, Cuttack, in 1956.

In recent years, he has re-emerged as a performer specialising in abhinaya, and has participated in major national and international events including Festivals of India abroad. He has imparted training at the Odissi Research Centre, Bhubaneswar, and is presently running his own institution, Srijan. He has been honoured with the Sangeet Natak Akademi award, the Padma Shree, the Padma Bhushan and the Kalidas Samman.

BHIMSEN JOSHI



Why should music come free?

Sprawled comfortably on a diwan and leisurely mixing 'khaini', his self-proclaimed brain tonic, Pandit Bhimsen Joshi, one of the foremost Hindustani classical vocalists seems every inch at peace with himself and his art.

The maestro was initially reluctant to grant an interview. "I am fed-up of being misquoted," he explained. "I say something and what appears in print is completely different. Most people have no sensitivity to music, so what is the point of saying anything?" Perhaps it is this inherent fear of being misunderstood that has made the 70-year-old musician somewhat of an enigmatic recluse.

At an age where the word is often sacrificed at the altar of the raga, Pt Bhimsen Joshi is one of the few artistes who have refused to join the ranks of the butchers. He says, "I always make it a point to sing the word clearly. If you can speak clearly, why can't you sing clearly? If you take the trouble to communicate words clearly in a 'bandish', even though technically it is not imperative to do so, it only enriches the musical experience. Why must the audience be forced to strain both their ears and their imagination to figure out what you're saying?"

A strong votary of making the arts self-supporting, he decries the current trend of holding free concerts. "When nothing in the world is free of cost, why should only classical music be so? Besides, the likelihood of ticket holders walking out midway through a concert is considerably less. A person who has spent money will listen — 'dil se sunega' — and when people can afford to spend money on cinema tickets, why not classical music?" he asks.

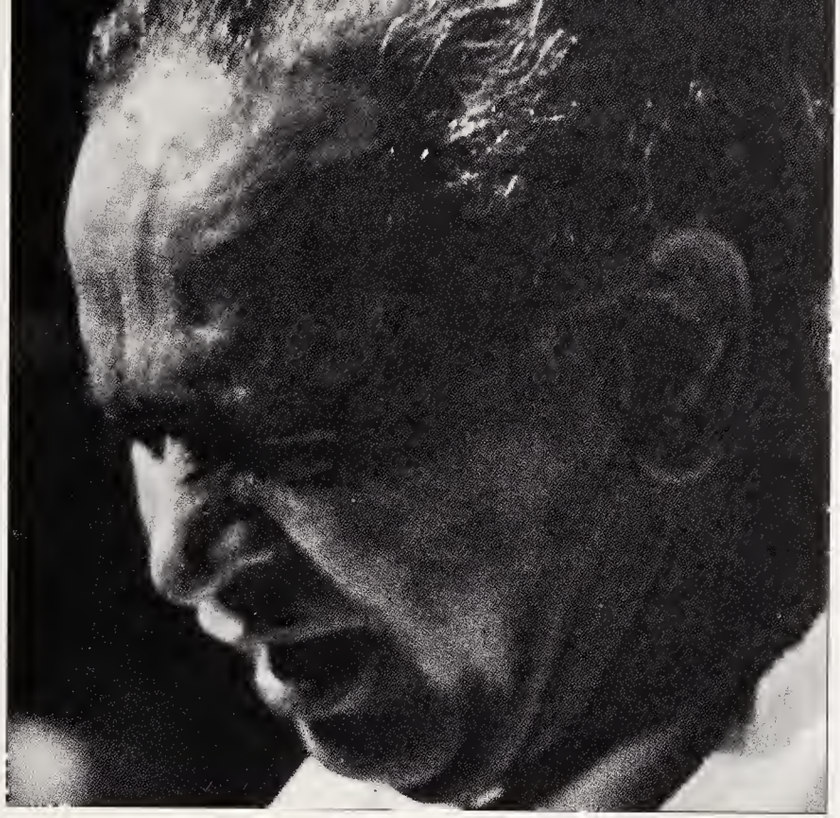
Bhimsen Joshi feels that superficial audiences composed of socialites who do not have a genuine interest in music will be eliminated the moment tickets are sold for a concert. He says, "In Pune, where I live, there are no free concerts. Audiences have an appreciation of the arts."

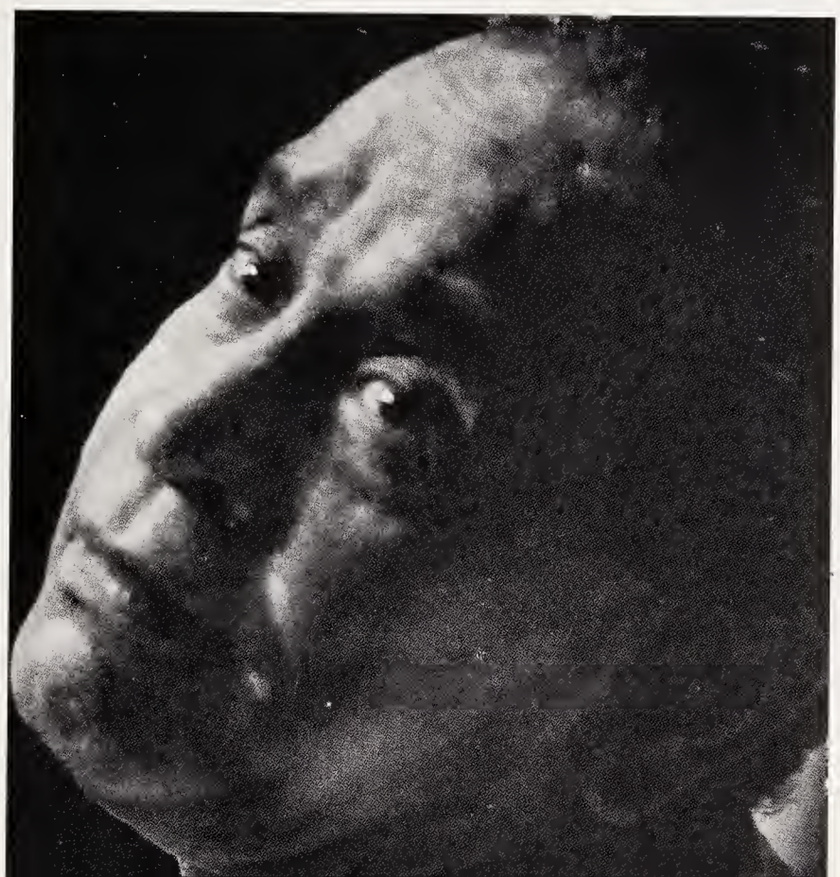
Bhimsen himself learnt to value his art the hard way. Despite years of training, there were times when no performances came his way, sometimes for as long as six months at a stretch. "But I was certain that I would not make a compromise. I could easily have got disheartened and disillusioned, but I pursued my riyaz and sadhna regardless."

It is perhaps for this reason that the maestro is not favourably disposed to the idea of his own children taking up music as a profession. All of them sing, but he feels "there is so much competition. By the time you reach anywhere you are in your middle age. Besides, there is no point in becoming a professional musician unless you pursue it like a tapasya. You must be like one possessed."

Surprisingly, Bhimsen does not view the increasing popularity of classical music as a good omen. "This will promote a lot of sub-standard music. For instance, why must national programmes be broadcast every week, or every month for that matter? As it is no one listens to All India Radio, and in just filling that slot, a lot of undeserving, B-grade candidates are getting exposure. After all, it is the nation's stature that is at stake. A certain standard must be maintained," he declares firmly.

As for himself, even while diversifying to sing and compose music for the Lok Seva Sanchar Parishad's audio-visual presentations on national integration, he claims he never lost sight of his roots.The short films Mile Sur Mera





Tumhara set in Raga Bhairavi and Baje Sargam in Raga Desh have become all-time hits. Besides, he has also sung for a few films like Ankahi, Basant Bahar, Birbal My Brother and some Marathi films as well. "If the song is suited to my style, I sing," he says simply.

However, the maestro is unhappy with the younger generation of vocalists who he feels are compromising excellence for the sake of variety in their repertoire. He cautions, "A little learning is not enough. After learning the 'sahitya' or literary aspect, if they think they have become performers, they are only fooling themselves. Acquiring a certain amount of knowledge is not enough. And it is the singer who has to guard against short term gains and publicity. A few early programmes, a few reviews get the better of them, and when the real time comes they have become so swollen-headed that they start to go downhill."

His own passionate involvement and sensitivity to music is more than evident in his singing. Charged with a passion for music, young Bhimsen had roamed far in search of the perfect guru, running away from home several times, until he met Rambhau Kundagolkar, popularly known as Sawai Gandharva.

But finding the best teacher is only the initial step in learning music. Bhimsen Joshi recalls, "My guru did not teach me at all for the first year. I would do 'seva' like fetch

water, sweep his house and generally do anything he asked me to, but he did not even look at me. He was testing my seriousness. And only when he was convinced did he start teaching me. But even then, for years he taught me only the Todi, Multani and Puriya ragas to prepare my voice. It was as if he was polishing gold. He would say, "Only if the machine is in good condition will the record play well." What is the point in learning ten ragas in a day if you can't sing even one properly? But youngsters today are in such a tearing hurry to learn as many ragas as they can that they have lost sight of perfection."

Bhimsen recounts how, as a student, he was not allowed to hear any other singer save his own guru for fear that it may influence his singing. "My guru felt that until my 'swar gyan' was complete, the purity of the style must be protected and nurtured."

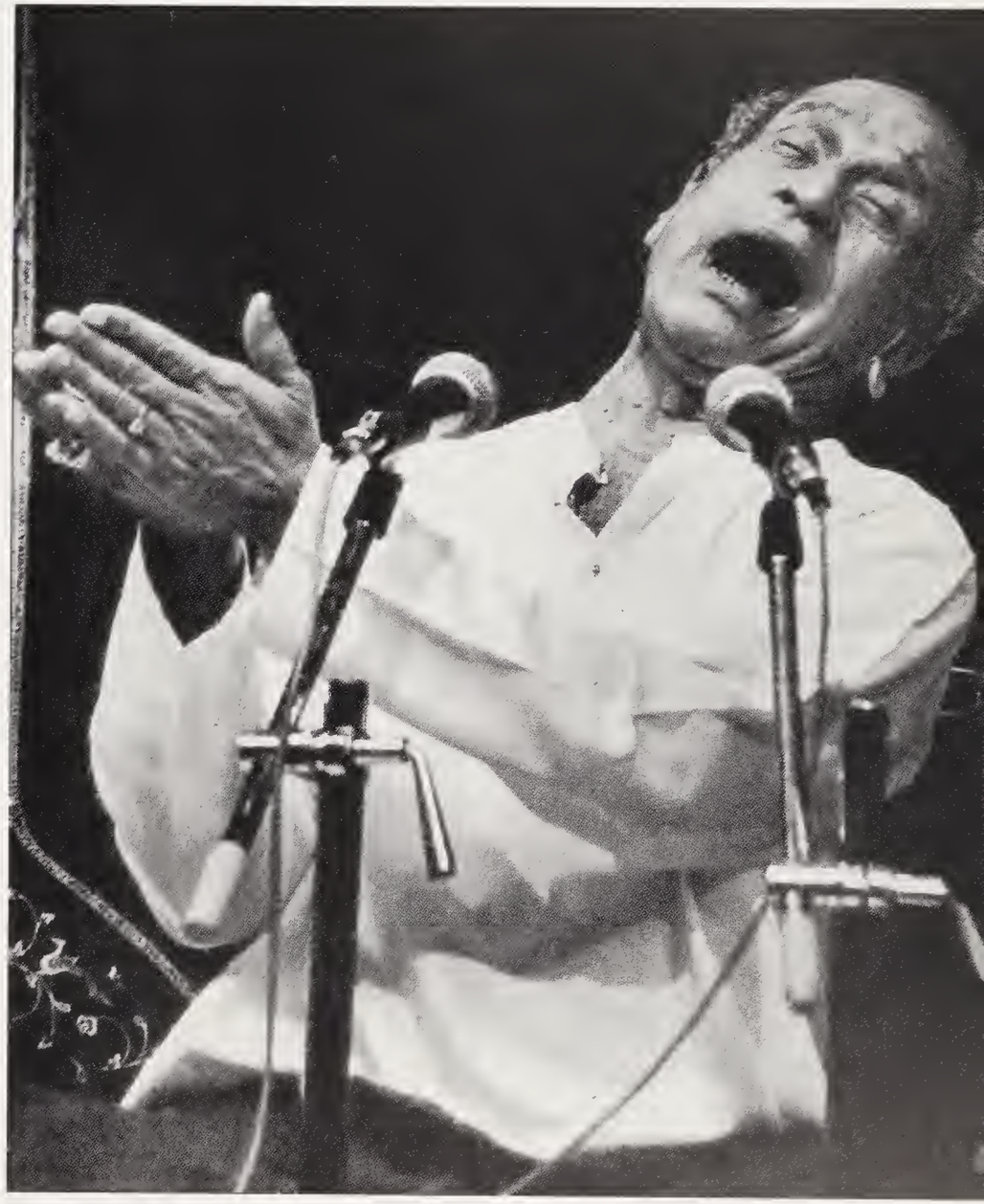
For the same reason, his guru used to insist on a healthy body. "We used to do body-building exercises which lasted for four hours, before starting our riyaz. And only when we were totally burnt out did we stop. But today's children can't even sit in one place for four hours, let alone practice for that long. A plethora of distractions like radio, television, films and socialising take up most of their time. Besides, they are so lazy that if the bathroom is slightly far away, they may want to go there on a scooter!"

This is the reason why he has only three disciples. For, he

says, he does not believe in passing on 'vidya' either indiscriminately or to the undeserving. Asked how far his disciples have come, he says, "the guru's job is to impart shiksha or knowledge, but he can hardly guarantee success as a musician, which is dependent on a multitude of factors."

Contrary to popular belief, Bhimsen's popular bhajan, Jo Bhaje Hari Ko Sada, is not his favourite. "My guru composed it and we used to sing it when he was very unwell. In that sense there is a deep association with it, but usually I sing it on popular demand."

He still bristles with anger at being reminded that he had run away from home several times in search of the perfect guru. "So what? So many boys run away from home. Do they all become singers?" One can hardly dispute that.



A guru cannot guarantee one's success as a musician: Bhimsen Joshi at a concert

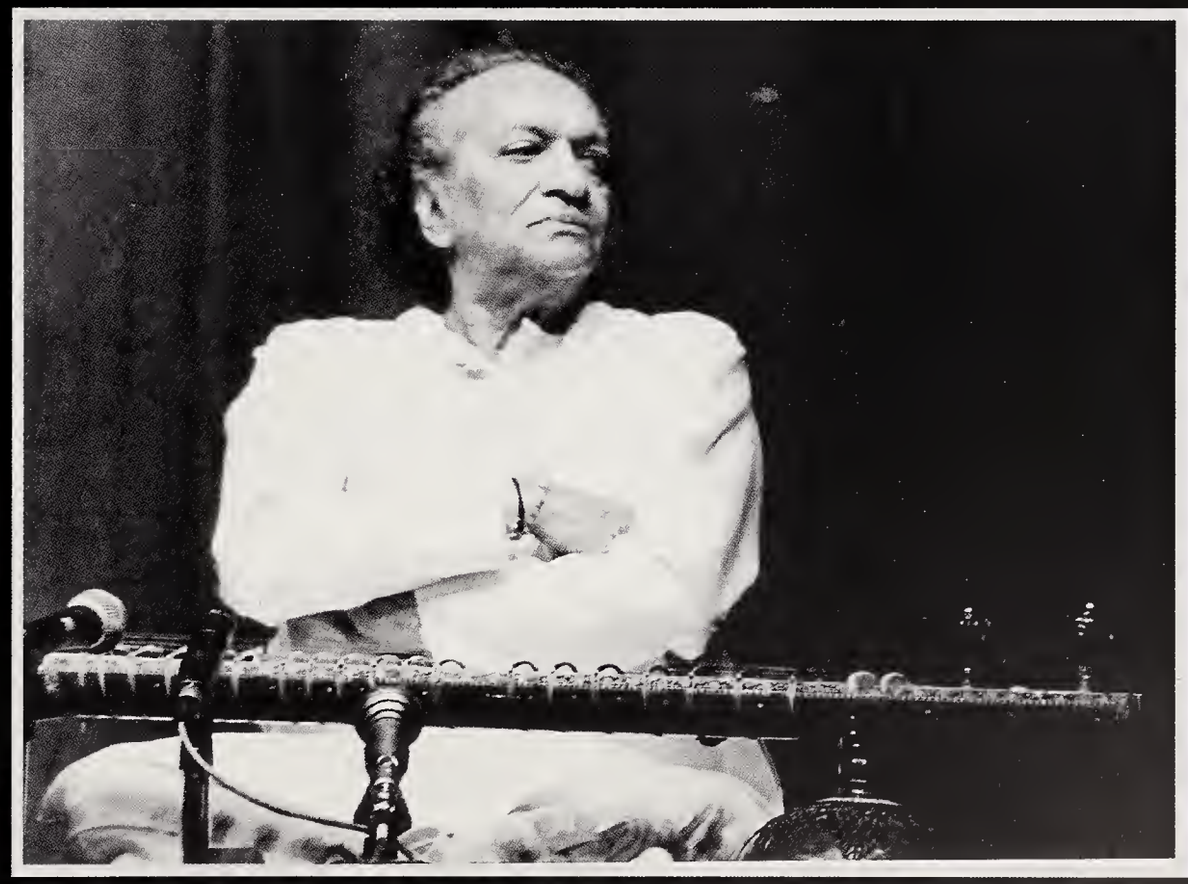
BHIMSEN JOSHI

Born in 1922, Pandit Bhimsen Gururaj Joshi received his training in music from Ustad Mushtaq Hussain Khan of Rampur and from Rambhau Kundgolkar, popularly known as Sawai Gandharva.

Pandit Joshi is noted for his extraordinarily rich and sonorous voice and the warmth and sensitivity of his renderings. His forte is khayal-singing of the Kirana gharana, but he is equally at ease with the thumri, pada, devotional and stage songs. He has created a number of new raginis, composed music for plays and also sung in films.

He has been honoured with the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, the Padma Shree, the Padma Vibhushan and the Tansen Samman.

RAVI SHANKAR



Sitar maestro
Ravi Shankar

Creativity is not gimmickry

Cult figure, gimmick king, creative genius. He is all this and more. More importantly, he has continued to remain so. A veritable colossus, he has ridden the crest of success with practically no dips. He has the advantage of all the right antecedents as well. Brother of dancer Uday Shankar, star of the Maihar gharana of music and pupil of the redoubtable guru Baba Allauddin Khan.

Just as temperamental as his guru, Ravi Shankar is said to have left the country in a huff in '93, following some dispute over land for his gurukul to teach music. He returned in '94. "There was no question of leaving for good. It has been the tragedy of my life — being quoted out of context. I have suffered so often that I have now given up being affected by it."

The problem started when he asked for and was allotted land to set up a gurukul in a prestigious area of South Delhi. "Bureaucrats asked me to pay commercial rates and told me that I could not build a house on the campus for myself. How can there be a gurukul without a guru living there? Now, not only has the land been allotted, but they have given it at a much lower rate than they had quoted earlier. I will be refunded some money that I had deposited," he chuckles. Bureaucratic wrangles and red tape are obviously things beyond his comprehension.

"The same is the case with this house. I read reports how our stuff had been thrown out and how I owed the government a huge amount of money as rent, and that I should vacate it as I was no longer a member of Parliament. It was quite an exercise to make them understand that I had got the house as an artiste well before I even became an MP," says Shankar.

This was the second time that the maestro attempted to set up a gurukul. The last time was some years ago when he had started a gurukul in Banaras called Himangana, named after

his mother. "Banaras has a special place in my heart. I have great memories of it and a fond attachment for the place, that is why I had chosen it. But I had to give it up because the input in terms of people was just not coming from there, but outside. Banaras has changed a lot since I last knew it. Ab to goonda gardi ho gayi hai wahan," he says, lamenting the lumpen element there. Evidently the dream that turned sour still has the power to pain.

But as the conversation proceeds, it is evident that the pain has made him even more determined to make it work this time, with a spiritual acceptance of situations that one can neither control or, for that matter, change. This is not to say that the contradictions do not exist: The pashmina shawl draped carefully on the right shoulder, a sandalwood paste tilak on his wide forehead and the almost ascetic countenance runs parallel with a Charvaka or hedonist way of life. But then who is to decide what path another person treads?

He has been rather unwell these past few months, but laughs it off saying, "Dil ka thoda problem tha, always dil ka hi to problem tha!" (It was a problem of the heart — always it was the problem of the heart!)

The maestro has often performed for the cause of the handicapped and the spastics. "It is heart-rending to see all those bright brains trapped in uncoordinated bodies," he says with feeling.

It is this intensity that often lands him in trouble. While on the one hand Shankar is seen as a creative genius, on the other is the perception that he indulges in a certain amount of gimmickry. "It is a matter of opinion. Even if Mian Tansen were to arrive here and play, they would find something wrong. Our music has never stood still and those musicians who, like parrots, just spew out by rote, call anyone who is creative 'gimmicky'. It is new, so it is gimmicky. The taste of the pudding is in the eating is all I can say."

As for tailoring his music to the demands of a foreign audience, he retorts, "When I started to play, I had childhood memories of travelling all over the world as a dancer in my brother Uday Shankar's troupe, so I was very keen that I give the best and the purest. The only difference was that I presented it in a duration that was acceptable. So many of our great musicians have cut three-minute, 15-minute discs or short recordings for the radio, and at the same time sung or played one raga for three hours. How come they were never criticised?" he asks.

Shankar recounts how the same musicians who criticised him, now copy his style. "They condemned me for so many years, now they too light incense and copy my style of stage setting. After years they acknowledge that it was I who opened the doors for everyone. It was the first time an Indian musician was interacting with the western world in English and French. Now everyone can speak in English," says the maestro with a charming trace of a Bengali accent in his Hindi.

Shankar says the popular perception that western audiences are not serious enough or unable to understand our music is fallacious. "They have reached a saturation point in their own music, so they hear our music sans ego. The spiritual content impresses them. They hear with all their heart. And unlike Indian audiences, they are not impressed by fast tempo and don't drown the music in the clapping," he says.

How about his playing with western and jazz musicians? "When I played with Yehudi Menuhin, they said I was

Sharing an emotional moment: Ravi Shankar with Krishanarao Shankar Pandit

doomed. When I played with George Harrison, they said I would become a raga-rock king. But that is another aspect of me — of a composer. It should not be confused with that of a musician. It is a distinct identity. I can't help it. I must create. It is like saying if you eat this you can't eat that," he says pointing to bowls of crackers and cashewnuts. "If your foundation is strong, then you can do anything and still not be deflected," says the maestro.

It is perhaps this rootedness that has impelled him to diversify and create music for various films including Satyajit Ray's Apu Trilogy, Parash Pathar, Anuradha, Genesis, Gulzar's Meera, Richard Attenborough's Gandhi; and a couple, Charlie and Chapaqqua, in Hollywood as well.

Another aspect of his personality is that of passing on his legacy as a guru. But here again he is accused of globetrotting and not paying too much attention to training. "It is true. But somehow, it is not a problem. All my senior students are so well established that they travel with me. The ones who are still learning, live with me."

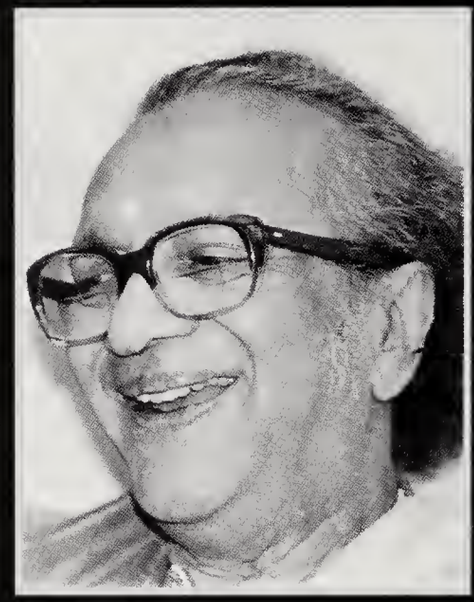
As for his own guru, he has fond memories. "Baba was an unusual person. Austere, with a traditional value system, he had strong dos and don'ts, like celibacy or brahmacharya. I, who had been leading a carefree life with hardly any childhood to speak of, had never attended formal school. Initially, I found it tough. But all the more reason that this discipline was imperative. I would never have learnt music otherwise. He made me open my mind. He had a virulent temper. You got thrashed if you played a wrong note. I was the only one of his disciples who was never caned. Despite the fact that he was my father-in-law, ours was more a father-son relationship." Did he imbibe the same temper as well? "I used to have a terrible temper, but I've learnt through Baba's experience. You hurt so many people. I've tried to curb it over the years," he says almost humbly.

What about the ever-increasing breed of sitar players in the last few years? "There are many more sitar players today, but there are not many giants. I think this generation wants too much too soon. It is not as if they lack in 'tayyari' (preparation) but that depth, that maturity is just not there. Indian music is not just virtuosity. There is a philosophical, spiritual element to it that is its soul," says Shankar.

Even his worst critics cannot help but admire the spiritual element and strength in his music. Does it stem from religious belief? "I am definitely not ritualistic, fundamentalist or fanatical. But religion definitely plays a major role in my music." His wife Sukanya reveals that he loves to go to the Tirupati temple and that he meditates and offers prayers everyday. Just then his teenaged daughter comes in to remind him that it is time for her lessons. Quite evidently, the maestro is eager to hand over the legacy to the next generation. And the one after that...

Ravi Shankar and Ali Akbar Khan with Baba Allauddin Khan at Maihar

RAVI SHANKAR



Born in 1920, Pandit Ravi Shankar has played a leading role in making Indian music known and appreciated the world over.

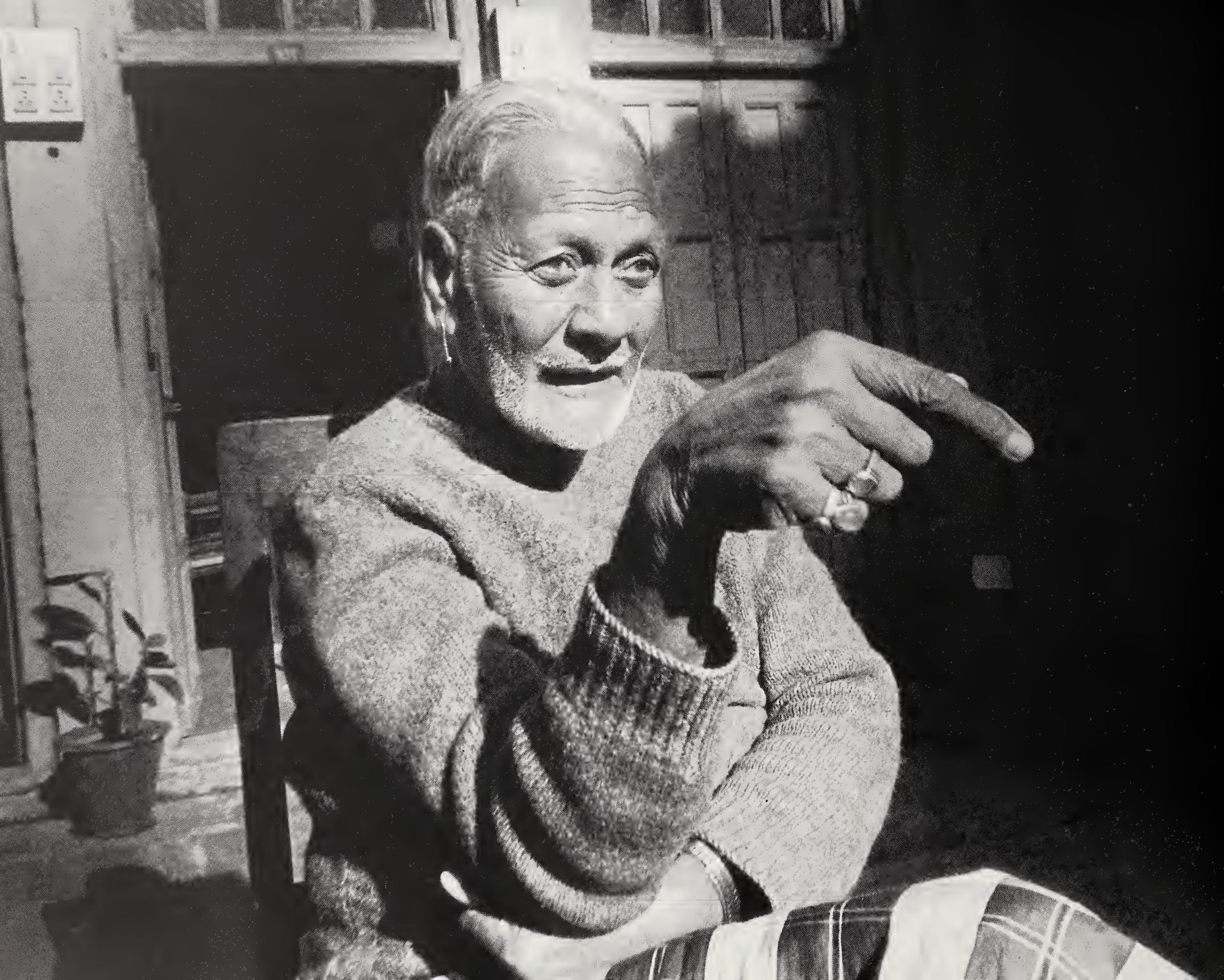
He started his career as a dancer in the troupe of his brother, Uday Shankar. But he soon took to the sitar. His work is distinguished for its crisp clarity and its high aesthetic content.

His contribution to orchestration in Indian music is tremendous. He has evolved and established a characteristic style of playing the sitar and has composed new ragas as well.

He was associated with All India Radio as conductor of Vadya Vrindha. For some years he ran a School of Indian Music in Los Angeles.

His work has won him several laurels, including the Silver Bear Award, the Padma Shree, the Padma Bhushan and the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award. He was elected Fellow of the Akademi and has been a nominated Member of the Rajya Sabha.

BISMILLAH KHAN



Humans have to be humane first

As I panted my way up the steep red sandstone stairs, I couldn't help wondering how he, at his age, negotiated his way up. The place was a modest hotel in Fatehpuri, the veritable edge of Chandini Chowk. The person who had dragged me out of bed at an unearthly hour was the octogenarian shehnai maestro Bismillah Khan.

"I am only free very early in the morning," he had warned me the previous evening, as he sat in the green room of the Siri Fort auditorium, tuning up with his accompanists before a concert in January '94. With three concerts in three days and an award rolled in for good measure, he was certainly active for his age.

The stairs led to an open courtyard, like old houses in the walled city. All around the open space were the rooms. The maestro was offering namaz, we were told. We waited. After half an hour he emerged — beaming. "Shall we sit in the sun," he asked, proceeding to lower himself into an old-fashioned wooden chair.

The familiar white stubble, a white and blue checked lungi and a tattered grey pullover were as natural as his eastern Uttar Pradesh accent. The moment he started talking in that lilting Bhojpuri-Banaras manner, any illusions about his age were immediately shattered. For all his smiling, grandfatherly countenance, he could well be the archetypal angry young man.

"The shehnai is the most difficult instrument to master and has the ability to dominate and override all other instruments. Other musicians are scared to let it grow," he crackled.

While this may be a debatable contention, the fact remains that his style is so distinctive that even the uninitiated listener can identify the performer. That there are such few

exponents of the wind instrument has only added to the maestro's name becoming almost synonymous with it. The sombre grandeur of dhrupad, the elegance and intricacies of khayal, the nuances of the thumri 'ang' and the lilt of the folk melodies are inextricably woven together in his music and are manifest everytime he plays the shehnai.

The silver earring in his right ear glistened in the early morning winter sun as he held forth. By this time, a small group had gathered around him in the courtyard. Some were members of his entourage, others were the usual crowd of hangers-on that hover and live on the fringes of every musician.

Like most musicians of the earlier generation, Bismillah too loves playing to this permanent gallery of admirers, though whether or not he does that in his music is another matter.

When I persisted in asking why there were so few exponents of the instrument, he practically growled, "The easiest thing in the world is to ask a question. And you know what the most difficult thing is? To answer it." Suitably reprimanded, I still insisted on the answer.

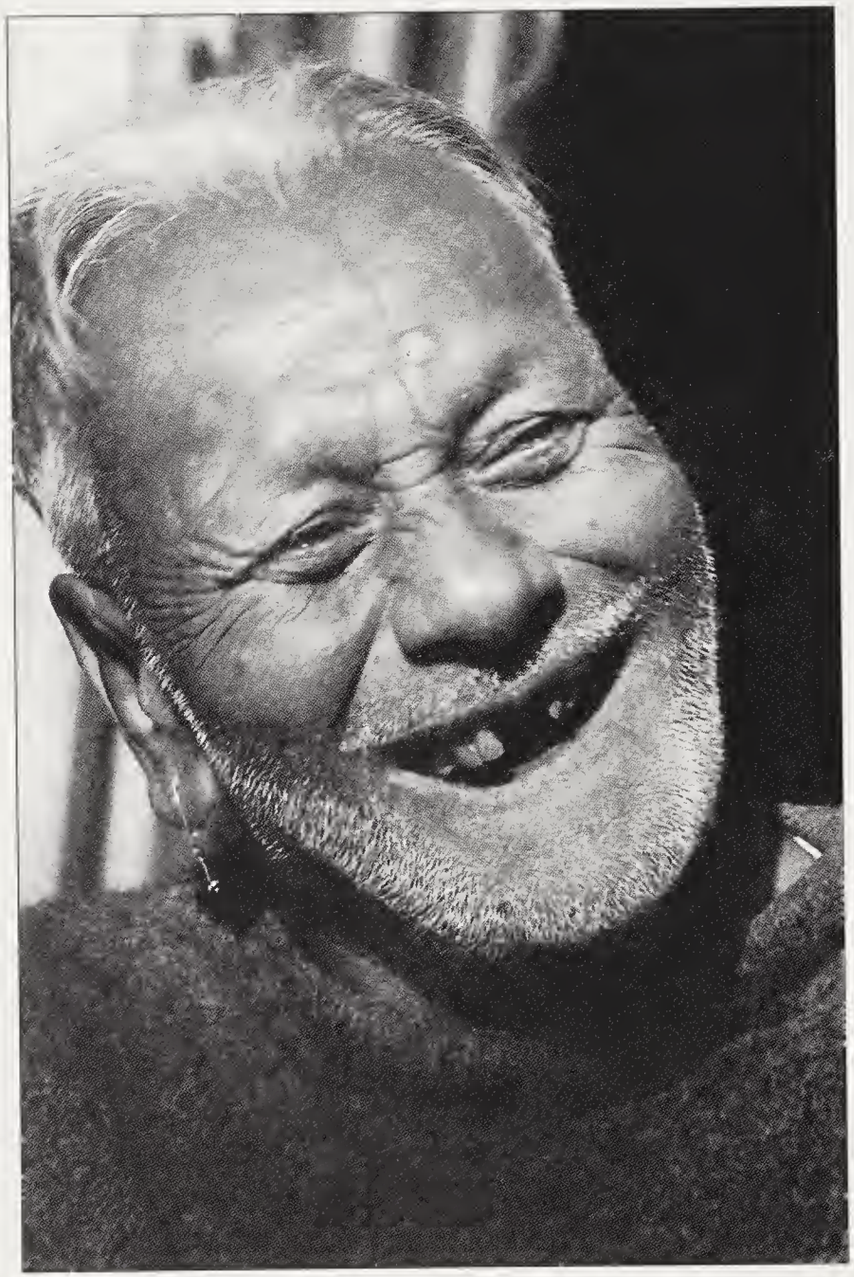
"How can there be growth? The shehnai is an instrument that finds takers only among the poorer classes, while a sitar or sarod player will invariably hail from the upper classes. So neither do they have the means nor the education to project themselves. That is why they languish unsung," declared the maestro.

In fact, even in his own family, while two of his sons and a couple of grandsons practise the shehnai, one of his sons runs a grocery shop in Banaras. He is teaching one of his grandsons to speak in English. "So that when I go to America-vemerica I don't have any problem. Earlier when I took one of my grandsons to America, he lost his head and decided to stay there. Now I am training this fellow." The fellow in question seems happy to hang on the fringes.

What about the women in the family? Do any of them play? "No. As for me, it has become my means of livelihood. But as it is forbidden in my religion, none of the women were allowed to learn," he said.

But he clarifies that he has nothing against women learning per se. "If it was permitted in my religion, I would have shown the world a thing or two," he thundered.

At one level he is a staunch Muslim, on the other hand he is a permanent fixture at the Vishwanath temple in Banaras, where he goes practically everyday to perform when he is in town. Isn't playing in the temple against his religion? "Have I been going since yesterday? My ancestors and I have been playing in that temple for centuries. A temple is not the personal property of anyone. The gods belong to everybody. Music is one thing that brings the Hindus and the Muslims together. Why should it be used to divide?" he asked.



It is perhaps this synthesis of tradition and culture in his creativity sans the divisiveness of any kind of fundamentalism that led him to declare: "Human beings have to learn to become humane first. They are closer to the devil. Those who divide, cannot reach there," he says, pointing heavenwards. "Maano to devta, nahin to pathar to hain hi — to a believer even a stone is God incarnate." Bismillah's challenge was that he would be the first one to play at Ayodhya, but only if the police was removed from there.

"Music is such a blessing that everyone should partake as much of it as possible. Today there are several musicians who do not understand the true spirit of music, but they have become great because their names have become famous. I see all this happening, but I keep aloof," said the young old man.

How about the arrogance that is typical of half-baked knowledge? "Like the proverbial tree laden with fruit, true knowledge is not lightweight. But in the quest for just that right note, a true artiste can forgo everything. For without that particular note, the musician goes through hell. It is like being alive when you want to die," he said intensely.

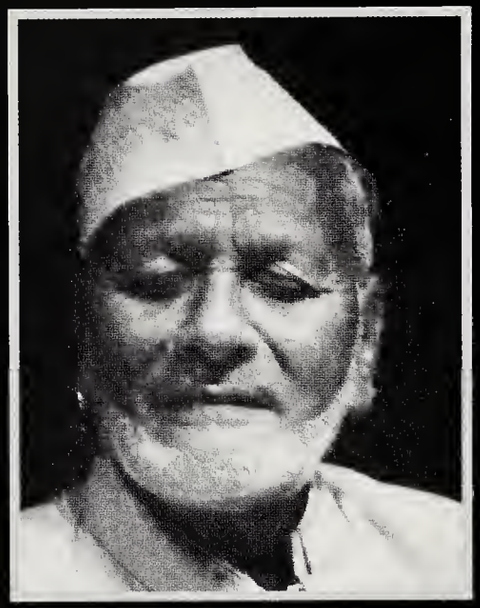
For the maestro believed, "Ek sadhe, sab sadhe, sab sadhe sab jaye." Loosely translated it means if you try to master one thing, you can do it, but run after too many things, and you lose all.

Evidently the maestro has not permitted himself to be deflected from the one thing that is his life blood. "What makes you special is when you say something with your music and none can match it!" His lifelong quest for music that is "lajawaab" or sans peer is evident in his concerts even to this day.

Soaring, scaling fresh heights every time he puts the shehnai to his lips, it is a dimension that is indeed rare. How long does it take to master the shehnai? "One lakh years!" pat came the reply, without skipping a 'taal'.

It is all a matter of timing: The shehnai maestro

BISMILLAH KHAN



Born in 1916, Ustad Bismillah Khan hails from a family of musicians and is the foremost player of the shehnai today.

Endowed with a rich creative faculty, it is entirely through his efforts that the shehnai has acquired great dignity and popularity. He has developed a soft and delicate technique of his own in rendering the most difficult ragas on the instrument. His subtle nuances lend colour to his concerts and delight listeners.

Recipient of the Tansen Samman, the Padma Bhushan and the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, his has been a lifelong service to the cause of the shehnai.

ALI AKBAR KHAN

Today's gurus have no time to teach

It was right out of a fairy tale: A palace, a king and his court musician. As the beige-pink sandstone of the Umaid Bhawan Palace in Jodhpur turned a faint pink gold in the evening sun, Ustad Ali Akbar Khan sat on the verandah of the room where he used to perform as the erstwhile state court musician, his mood pensive.

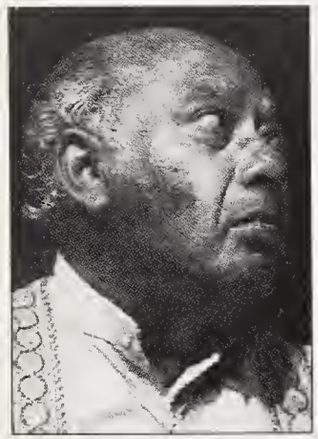
"When Baba Allauddin Khan, my father and guru, first sent me to Jodhpur, I thought to myself, 'Ah! at last there will be some respite from the 14-16 hours of riyaz — training. At best I would have to perform for an hour or two and I shall live in royal splendour'."

No such luck was in store. "How wrong I was! The Maharaja was fond of music and I was expected to play for six to eight hours. Apart from that, the princess too wanted to learn. So I was working on my music as much as earlier — with Baba. Though now I realise that it was a wise decision on Baba's part," said Ali Akbar in a voice that was barely audible.

The Ustad's Jodhpur link was revived at the golden jubilee celebrations of the palace in 1993 at which he dedicated Madhu-Malti, a new raga he had composed, to his former patrons. "I shared a special relationship with the maharaja. He would often ask me to play late into the night."

Ali Akbar, the sarod player known for his singular clarity of 'swaras' (notes), and the only son of Baba Allauddin Khan, was visiting India from California, where he now lives. This visit was especially to build the 'mazaar' on the graves of his parents in Maihar. But the 72-year-old Ustad was not particularly keen on coming again. "I used to come because of Maa and Baba, but now I am not keen on returning. Why should I come back? I left here after realising that there was no option."

Ali Akbar moved to California in the early '50s. "I made a lot of effort. Tees saal bahut jhak mari — I slogged for thirty years. But no help was forthcoming at that time. Indira Gandhi and Rajiv both promised to do something, but nothing happened. Disappointed, I left, but even there, I



am working for India." He returned again in 1995 to perform for the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation.

He reminds me that there were not so many activities and festivals in those days and patronage was not forthcoming easily. This singular lack of options compelled many musicians to look for greener pastures abroad.

He teaches in the United States and lives with his American wife and three children. His youngest child was only one-and-a-half in '94. His Indian wife lives in Calcutta, where most of his other eight children also live. The eldest child is close to 53. "Baba married me off when I was very young. And he insisted that I should not divorce my Indian wife. So I said to him, you keep your daughter-in-law, and I married again."

Did he not think he was being unfair to his Indian wife? "She would not have been able to adjust there. Despite asking her several times, she has refused to join me in the US. It is not as if I do not take care of her needs. She is well taken care of here," he justifies himself.

"I still dream of Baba often. Even now I feel that he is upbraiding me when I make a mistake or play a wrong note," says the Ustad. Baba inculcated in him a deep sense of discipline and respect for the guru. "Once when a sweeper from his own guru's village came to see him, I remember there was a flurry of activity as a chair was found for him and great respect was paid to him."

Baba was obviously the single most significant influence on Ali Akbar's life. He still speaks in glowing terms about his years with Baba. "It was Baba who brought the tabla into its own. Earlier the tabaliya used to be just told to 'theka lagao' and that was it. But he was the one who encouraged them to create patterns within the traditional framework."

As far as selective passing of the 'parampara' or tradition to the guru's children is concerned, Baba broke the tradition, recounted Ali Akbar. "His own guru never did that to him and he did not start it in his generation. He used to say, everyone should learn as much as they can imbibe. In fact before his guru, Mohammed Wajid Khan's son died, he taught Baba all he knew for he wanted the tradition to be passed on. I myself have never felt the need to discriminate between my children and my students."

There is an underlying hostility when he speaks about his 'guru-bhai' and sister Annapoorna's former husband, sitar maestro Ravi Shankar. "He was not there with Baba for too long. He learnt from me, my sister who is his ex-wife, and of course from Baba. In fact Baba asked him to play with me the first time. Stage fright overtook him and he was petrified," says the Ustad ostensibly mildly, but it is evident that the relations are more than a little cool.

"Musicians do not seem to take music very seriously these days. They play and sing faster than required and, as a

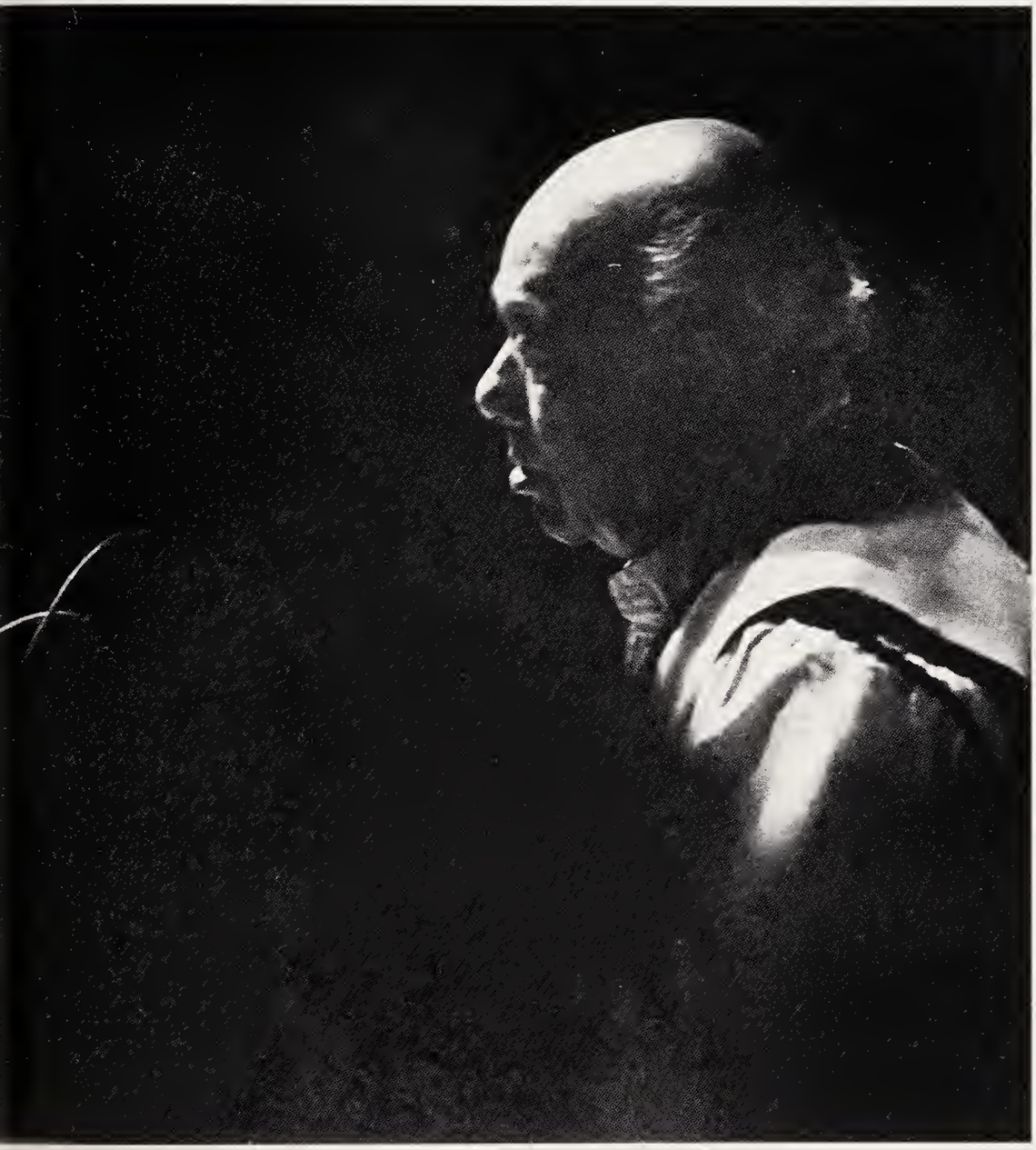
Capturing a myriad moods : Ustad Ali Akbar Khan during a concert in New Delhi in 1994

result, a great deal of impurity is creeping into various ragas. They do not realise that by doing this they are diminishing the special power of the ragas," says the Ustad.

A stickler for the time-honoured tradition of singing a raga according to the time cycle, Ali Akbar says, "Singing a raga at the wrong time is guaranteed to bring bad luck. 'Yeh abhishap hai. Maan hani hoti hai.' (It is inauspicious for your fortunes come under a cloud.) If you sing Yaman Kalyan in the morning, 'vansh mein diya jalane wala nahin rahega' — generations of the family will be wiped out," he declares firmly. After a thoughtful pause, he adds, "Those who are not paying heed to it, are repenting and will repent further. It grows like cancer, and then there is no cure."

He divides the Indian audiences into four groups: Those who know nothing, those who know a little, those who are interested only in finding fault armed with their little knowledge and, the most dangerous of all, those who revel in jealousy and ego.

For his own part, Ali Akbar has built extensive archives in his California school of music, which boasts of an enviable collection of rare recordings, rare ragas, as many as 500 compositions in a raga. He is also trying to computerise the notations in ragas on the pattern of Western classical music. Presently there are 5,000 students who have learnt Indian classical music at the school.



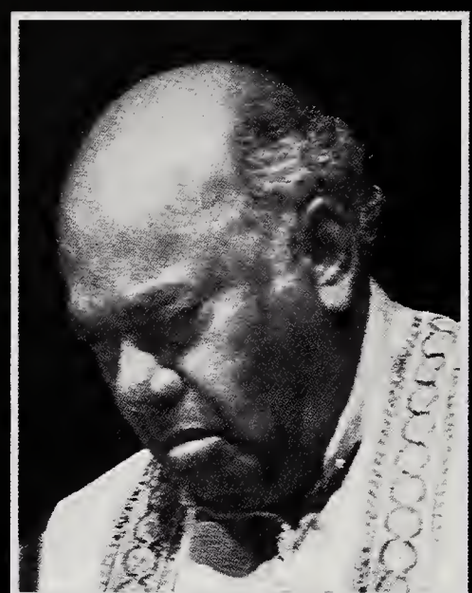
Ali Akbar says he was among the first to go abroad to perform and fondly recalls his first meeting with the violin maestro, Yehudi Menuhin. "At a music festival in Europe, both Menuhin and I were to perform. I was painfully shy then. He was standing with his violin next to a huge piano. He came up to me and started chatting as if he had known me all his life."

Apart from Menuhin, Ali Akbar has played with several Western musicians as well — Julian Brain and John Handy among others. "The idea was to attract people to Indian classical music. The problem is more of reaching out to them," says the Ustad candidly. Yet he maintains that Indian and Western music don't exactly make excellent bedfellows. "It is like eating an Indian curry and a western dish and not getting the flavour of either. It may be an interesting experience and fun, but it can at best remain an entertaining gimmick."

A staunch believer in the 'guru-shishya parampara', he says, "The scenario for classical music is bleak. The situation has gone from bad to worse and will become even worse," he predicts ominously. "Earlier there was no problem of food, there was place to do riyaz. Now the gurus are too busy performing themselves, they have no time to teach..."

As if to complement the Ustad's mood, the sky turned an inky blue, the liquid gold disappeared and the shadows loomed larger...

ALI AKBAR KHAN

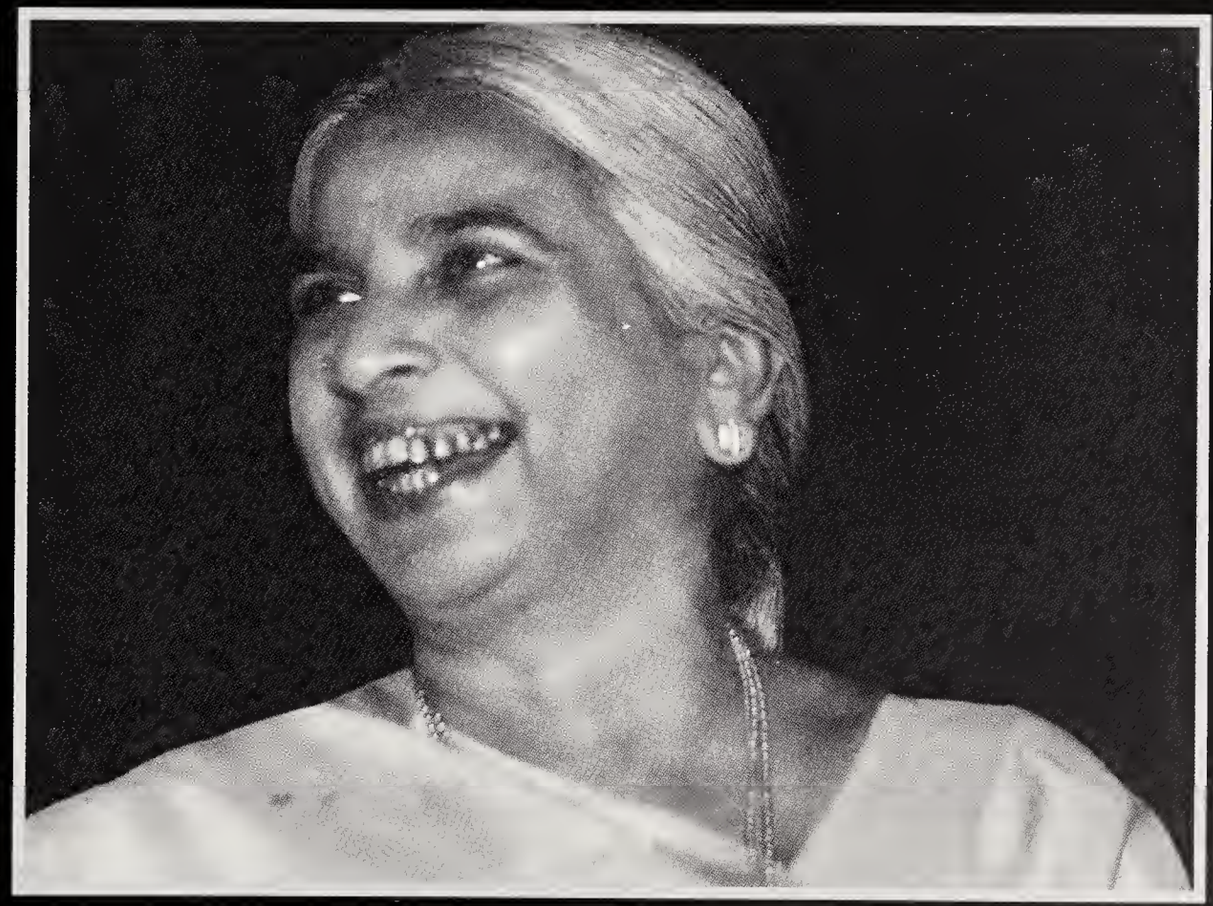


Born in 1922 in Shibpur, now in Bangladesh, Ustad Ali Akbar Khan studied Hindustani instrumental music with his father Ustad Allaudin Khan and his uncle Ustad Aftabuddin Khan of the Senia gharana.

His has been a towering presence in the music scene in the 20th century not only for his mastery over the sarod but also for the pioneering role he has played in opening up the world to Indian classical music. The Ali Akbar Khan College of Music in California bears witness to this historic achievement. He has trained several outstanding pupils, notable among whom are his sons Ashish Khan and Dhaynesh Khan. He has composed music for films such as Satyajit Ray's Debi and Tapan Sinha's Kshudhita Pashan.

Ustad Ali Akbar Khan has received honorary doctorates from the universities of Delhi, Dhaka, Rabindra Bharati, Visva-Bharati and the California Institute of Arts. He received the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award and was elected Fellow of the Akademi. He has been honoured with the Padma Bhushan as well as the Padma Vibhushan.

GIRIJA DEVI



Life and music must be in sync

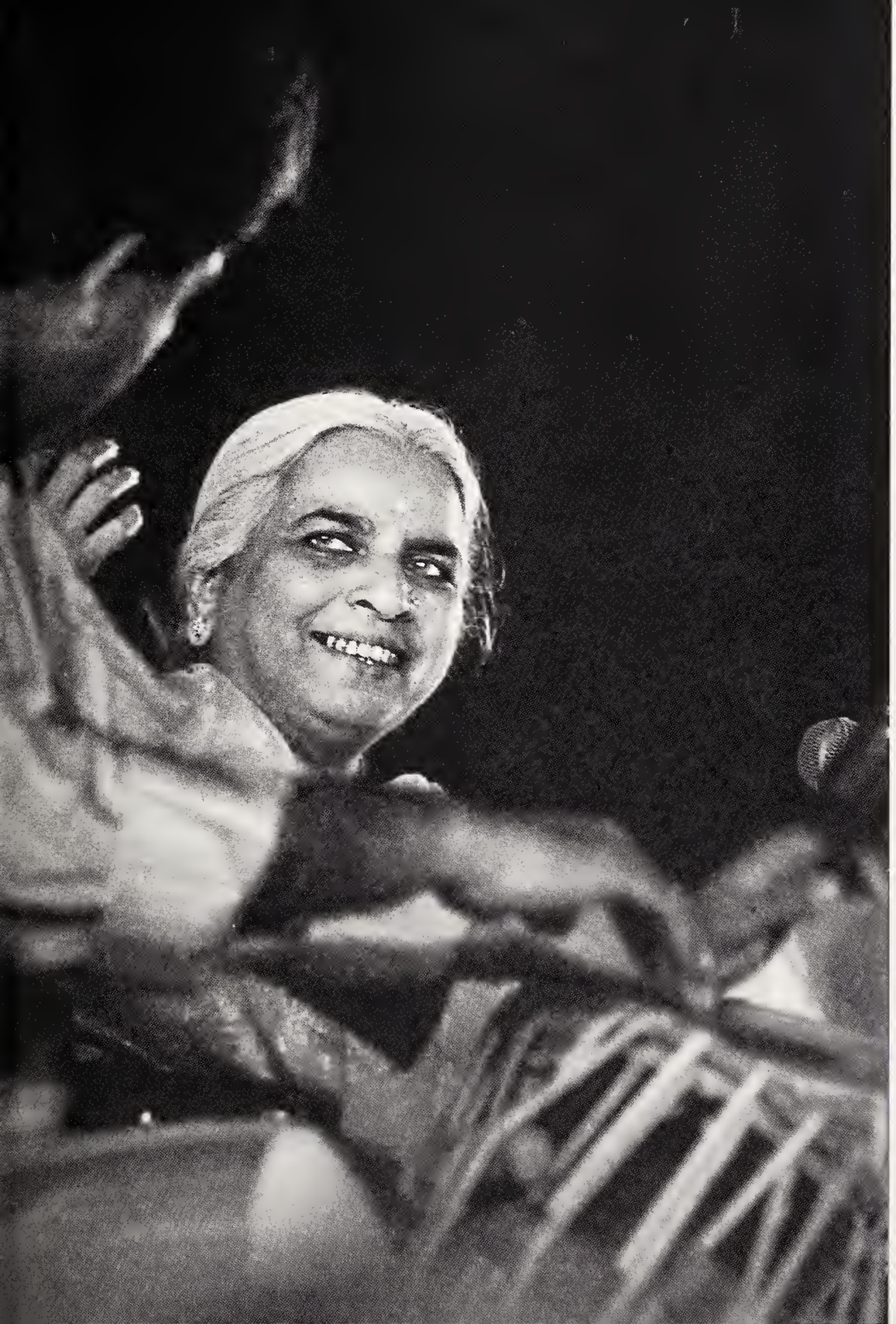
The white hair is deceptive. The voice rings as clear as a temple bell and is just as ageless. A range that traverses over the octaves with tremendous ease, there is a unique metallic quality in her voice, which does not jarr but endows it with character. Girija Devi, the Hindustani classical vocalist, speaks in a pronounced Bhojpuri accent, with all the musicality and sweetness of the 'purab ang.'

This sweetness carries forward in her song too, incorporating the now infrequently sung hori, kajri, chaiti and tappa, forms of light classical music, as an intrinsic part of her repertoire. Her paan-stained teeth peep out of her frequent smile as she glides through the notes. The song conjures up a picture of happy moments of spring. A beatific expression lights up her countenance. The picture is complete.

But as far as she is concerned, the picture is not complete. "Unless you are able to move people to tears with the sheer beauty of your music, your music is incomplete," she says. "Even now I feel I should take a break from the rat race and do more 'riyaz' — to achieve it."

Even as she wishes to improve her music, Girija Devi feels that the government only pays lip-service to music and musicians. "What is the point of giving us awards such as Padma Bhushans and Padma Vibhushans and giving us no other facilities? There is no quota or priority for something as basic as train or plane reservation, or even medical help. In a population of 80 crore, how many Padma Vibhushans are there? Even mere secretaries of MLAs and MLCs have priority over us. I don't know what we would do without our students? 'Kya photo sajane ke liye diya hai samman'?" Are these honours only for decorating the walls, she asks, her eyes flashing as much as the diamonds in her ears and nose.

She recounts times when organisers could not afford to put her up even in halfway decent places and her students, both



present and past, stepped in to help. "We are not exactly beggars, you know. I don't want to compromise my dignity by asking the government for help. Apart from this, artistes who are getting on in years have no income tax exemption or benefits. So many of our artistes are 70-75 years old and are still working hard to save some money but the tax structure is so lop-sided and unfair," she says.

She minces no words in expressing her disillusionment with the way the music world operates. "How many more years will I sing? Maybe two, maybe three. I do not want to sing and grab centrestage when I cannot sing the notes properly. But sometimes I feel it is all so pointless. It's better to just teach a few students and pass on the baton."

At the moment Girija Devi is a visiting professor with the Banaras Hindu University, after spending several years at the ITC Sangeet Research Academy in Calcutta. "I had refused several other offers, but BHU I could not turn down. After all, my memories and references are from there. It is my 'janam sthal' as well as 'tapo sthal'. (I was born here, I learnt my music here). If they asked me to even sweep the floor, I would be proud to do it," she says.

Yet, even outside the SRA, she carries on the guru-shishya tradition by teaching four girls, keeping them under her roof and training them free of cost. "Till I have the strength, I can hone their skill to perfection. What is the point of teaching when you have no voice left and cannot

even demonstrate correctly? The idea is to pass on the treasure while one can still show the way. If one can discover the old compositions and sing them, let alone create anew, it would be enough," she says in her inimitable style.

Her own treasure or 'punji' did not come to her as part of a genetic heritage. "How many poets were there in Meera Bai's family or for that matter how many heroines in Laxmi Bai's family?" she asks. Girija Devi had to pick each note with great effort and years of practice. Not born into a family of musicians, the music bug bit her early and her farmer father made sure that his favourite daughter got good training from the likes of Pandit Sarju Prasad Misra. "My gurus used to inculcate a sense of pride in excelling in ten ragas rather than running after a hundred. My elder sister used to sit for hours with me to help me with my riyaz."

Years later, her husband encouraged her to perform and sing. "He was a well-off man and was against my accepting money for concerts, for at some level it went against his self-respect. But I was adamant. I said even if I throw the money into the Ganga, I will not sing without payment. My logic was that it cuts into the payment and opportunity of other musicians if I sing for free. So he refused to accompany me on my concert tours."

Now it is this very gradation that has put her in the top bracket. But her utopian dream is to see that artistes get

together and fix their fees so that their not-so-worldly wise counterparts are not exploited.

It is evident that music is her only occupation as well as pre-occupation. "Even when I wanted to cry, I would dissolve my pain and tears in song. Music and life cannot be 'betaal', or out of sync." This is not to say that this is her only interest. Her love for dolls is almost legendary, as is her collection from all over the world. She loves to cook and feed people. She learnt horse-riding, swimming, badminton and cards to please her husband. But now, Appaji, a name given to her by her nephew which stuck, does not indulge in all these things. "It is like wearing a bikini at this age," she says.

Girija Devi is not sure that the present generation has the dedication required to learn and imbibe music. "Maybe the pressure of work is too much, preventing them from totally immersing themselves in it. These days they need academic as well as musical qualifications. If something happens to their voice, at least they can do something and not starve. But I feel they should stay away from performing too soon. They may impress but it has become more like a flash in the pan."

For a classical singer, any other kind of music is usually anathema. Girija Devi is no different. "Ghazal, qawwali, film music, disco and pop are all fine, but like after eating spicy chaat for a few days you long for plain dal-roti, so is it with classical music. Any music without a strong base can dazzle for a few days, but then it begins to pall. Any singing that is not versatile cannot sustain itself, or for that matter, audience interest," feels Girija.

That is a problem she for one has not faced. Her spellbinding thumris, with all their sensuous poetry, have not distracted this deeply religious singer from worshipping Shiva and doing the severe penance of the 'panch mahadev parikrama' every Monday. Most important, her extended repertoire of other forms of light classical music — tappas, kajri, hori and chaiti have endeared her to newer audiences and firmly sustained the older ones.

She is quick to point out that the trend of trying to fit three to four artistes into an evening's performance, as opposed to the all-night sessions of yore, has done its bit to commercialise classical music. "Audiences too have to attend office the next morning, unlike the raja-maharajas."

It was Holi, the festival of colours, the day I met her and she was missing Banaras deeply. That she is rooted in the eastern Uttar Pradesh tradition is evident as she says candidly, "Angrezi mein to na phool baraste hain, na paani chalakta hain, baithe rahiye sukhe," her hazel eyes flashing. Much as I tried, the closest I could translate this in English was 'In English, flowers do not come down in cascades, neither does water splash out of a pitcher with the same lyricism.' The inadequacies, may I add, are all mine.

GIRIJA DEVI

Born in 1929 at Varanasi, Girija Devi is one of the leading vocalists of Hindustani classical music. She started studying music at the age of five from Pandit Sarju Prasad Misra and continued subsequent training with Shrichandra Misra.

She sings khayals with great clarity and control and is an outstanding exponent of thumri, tappa, hori, kajri, and chaiti.

She has been honoured by many institutions and was associated with the Uttar Pradesh Sangeet Natak Akademi, All India Radio and the Sangeet Research Academy, Calcutta.

She has been honoured with the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award and the Padma Shree.

BALAMURALI KRISHNA

Innovation always raises eyebrows

I don't know if he was playing hard-to-get. I don't even know if he was diffident. Or was it just plain reluctance about interacting with the press? It is not as if he did not come to the phone. He did. He agreed to see me as well. But when it came to the actual meeting, something made him postpone it — three days in a row.

When I finally did meet him, it was the same old case of musicians collecting an audience even when they are just talking and not performing. Interestingly enough, except musicians, no artistes do this. It is something that is repeated so often that it is a surprise when there isn't a battery of hangers on.

It is not as if such an audience is always a nuisance, but it starts to distract when they are hanging on to every word the artiste is saying like the 'brahm vakya' or the ultimate truth, even as you are trying to pin him down.

In the case of M Balamurali Krishna, undoubtedly the audience at a senior All India Radio official's house was that of a high calibre, but the lure of playing to the gallery is so great that few can resist it. He couldn't either. Often, I had to draw his attention away from his audience.

The accusation of playing to the gallery notwithstanding, having experienced a certain depth and truth in Balamurali's music, it was evident that such depth is impossible to achieve without having gone through an 'agnipariksha', or baptism by fire. It is a well-known fact that it took Balamurali, a Telugu, a long time to get accepted by the "purists" in Tamil Nadu. However, he chooses to gloss over it.

"Newspapers created my so-called unacceptance. You journalists improvise like musicians and create misunderstandings! This is not correct. I was liked by all the people. Name the purists. Besides, what is the Madras Academy — just another organisation," he shrugs.

On a more thoughtful note he goes on: "When you innovate, they will raise an eyebrow — not only in music, but in

Tuning up to remain
in tune :
Balamurali Krishna

everything. When they understand, they too follow. When people don't accept, I am the happiest. This is an indication that they are jealous, for everyone wants to do pathbreaking work."

Isn't this lack of understanding painful? "No, it is more pitiable than painful. If they are able to pain us, it means that we are weak. Music is not responsible for such misunderstanding, but the performer. What is wrong in creation? After all, how did 'bannis' or 'gharanas' come about? When someone established his or her own style," says Balamurali.

He has certainly made his presence felt. Apart from M S Subbulakshmi, arguably, it is he who has found acceptance on both sides of the Vindhyas. Lok Kalyan Samiti's short films Mile Sur Mera Tumhara and Desh have added to a nation-wide acceptance.

Attempts to bridge the gap between Carnatic and Hindustani music have been made by many musicians, but the fact is that 700-year-old chasms are not easily cemented. The very composition of the Carnatic style is 'bhakti' oriented, what with the tradition of devotional compositions or 'krithis'. Yet, Balamurali has established a rapport with the northern audiences which can best be described as amazing.

"Music is the same — film, light, folk, Hindustani, Carnatic but if it is not able to reach the listener, then the fault lies more with the performer than the music," he says. It is evident that no such fault lies with this performer. He holds his audiences spell-bound with the sheer quality of his voice. Barriers of language fall away as if they don't exist.

Is there a dichotomy in his singing on stage and off it? "There are two types of music: For the spirit or the puja room and for earning a livelihood or entertaining. Music presented on stage is like coffee served to guests. The coffee remains the same, but the cup is changed. In my case, I don't think God only lives in the puja room. And I don't sing in the puja room. I see Him in audiences. It is He who is singing and He who is listening. The place is immaterial," says the maestro.

Does it not become material when music is a means of livelihood, what with artistes themselves playing an active part in the rise of the star system? "Stars were there all the time. After they became stars, the system came. Money has started coming in only very recently."

He says, "Don't forget, this is 'kalyug' and Tirupati is the God of this age. And what does he want as offering? Money. But what do you do with so much money? When I was earning Rs 100 in the '40s, I didn't know what to do with it, I still don't. I don't take any money for my concerts anymore. Everything goes to my school or to various charities — I have no money, I can only sing and help. Only the money that I earn from cassette royalties, Doordarshan and AIR do I spend on my personal expenses like paan."

Music to him is a spontaneous expression, with little importance given to composition. The melody is paramount. "I don't know anything except music. Without music Balamurali is nothing! Music is an ethereal experience. I don't feel any difference in Hindustani and Carnatic styles that is why I favour 'jugalbandis'."

In a musician of his calibre and age — he is 64 — the most important question is of legacy, of carrying forward the torch lit by him. None of Balamurali's children are musicians. "I'm not unhappy. If my children want to come on stage, they'll come as sons of so-and-so and not as persons in their own right. My students are like my children. I have a school in Madras."

Doesn't his frequent travelling interfere with his teaching? "Teaching is not my profession. I don't teach regularly. All my students are senior. They don't require regular teaching," he says.

When I point out that there are no second-rung musicians after the top layer, he asks, "How do we know? Given the opportunity they will prove their worth." He laments that this over-emphasis on wanting to know what was happening and passing a judgement on it was an indication of "pollution of the minds". He declares, "It is politicians who have polluted our minds."

From the corner of my eye I saw the coffee and savoury 'vadais' wilting in protest at being ignored. Like a true worshipper of the palate, lest they be degraded by lack of attention, I decided to call it a day, giving in to the smells of fresh filter 'cappy' from as south of the Vindhyas as Balamurali himself.

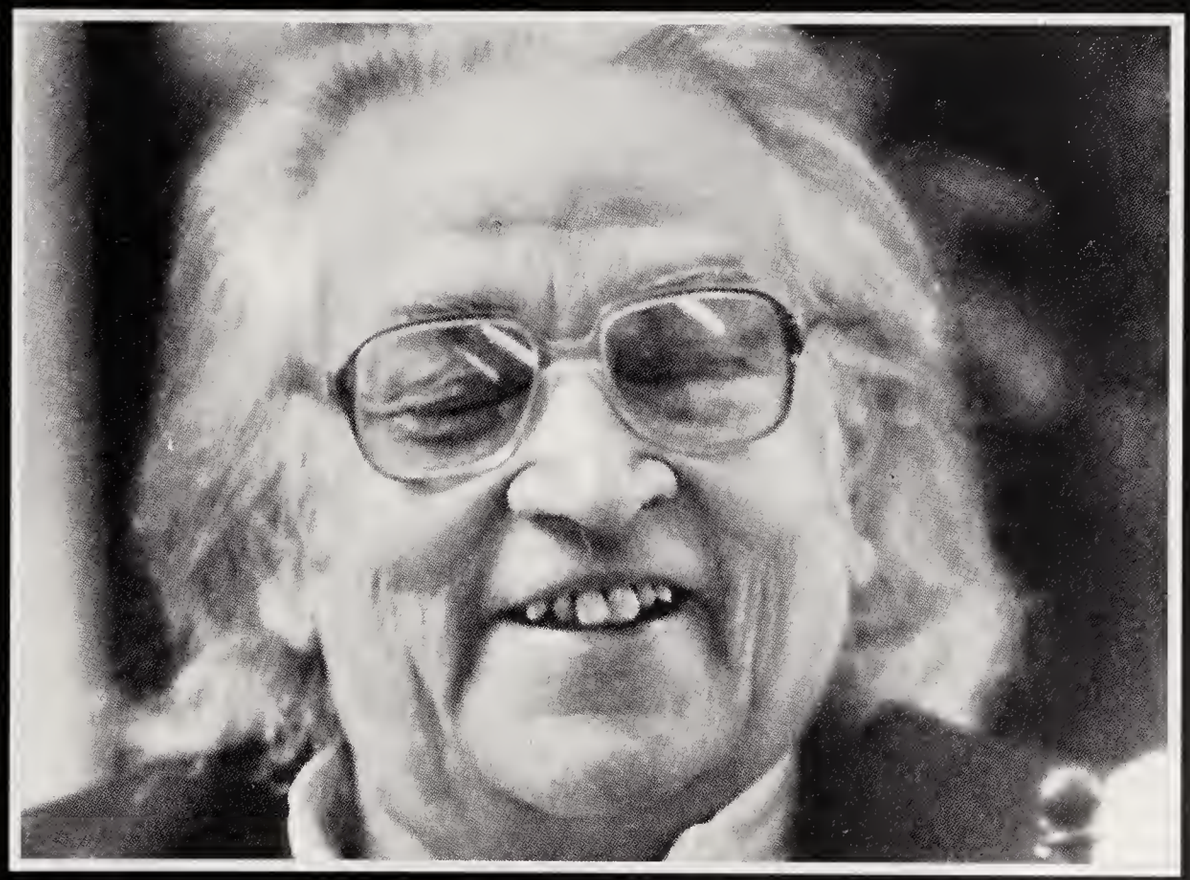
BALAMURALI KRISHNA

Born in 1930, Mangalampalli Balamurali Krishna received training in vocal music from Parupalli Ramakrishnaiah Pantulu and started his music career in childhood. Gifted with a mellifluous voice, Balamurali has created his own style that is known for its lyrical quality. He is not only a front-rank singer, but also a versatile instrumentalist, handling with facility the viola and the violin.

He has composed a whole range of kritis, varanas, padams, tillanas and new ragas. He has to his credit a number of books and has also sung and acted in films.

He was on the staff of All India Radio and was principal of the College of Music and Dance, Vijayawada. He has been honoured by various learned and academic bodies, and has received the Padma Shree and the Padma Vibhushan.

KISHAN MAHARAJ



The guru has to set the example

He lives in the Kabir Chaura area of Banaras. Once this neighbourhood pulsated with music of the highest calibre, for it was inhabited by luminaries of the 'Banaras baaz tabaliyas'. Now, it is evident that the place has seen better days. The narrow lanes are choked with squealing children, rickshaws, open drains and hordes of people. It reeks of decay.

The area fell strangely silent after the death of Anokhe Lal and Samta Prasad. One sound that still reverberated in the street was of the forceful playing of Pandit Kishan Maharaj, who was the third part of the trinity that ruled the tabla scene till as late as the early '80s. Son of the illustrious Kanthe Maharaj, Kishan Maharaj worked to get the tabla recognised as an independent instrument and to win for it a rightful place in the performing arts. He was, in a sense, the forerunner of the current trend which views the tabla as a solo instrument and not merely as a mere accompaniment. A blazing red vermilion tikka on his forehead, he continued the tradition begun by his forefathers. Kabir Chaura was still alive amid the decadence.

His beige, checked lungi virtually swept the floor, the spotless kurta a startling hue of white. A shawl draped around his shoulders kept out the mild Banaras cold. He had just emerged from his bath, for his silver hair was glistening with droplets of water. Many rings set with precious stones adorned his fingers, which moved like quicksilver to emphasise a thought or illustrate a point. He was every inch the grand old man of the tabla. Except, that day the red tikka was missing.

"I apply it after performing puja only before a performance. It is Devi Saraswati's blessings. Every year on the day of Basant Panchmi, I keep aside the red roli powder after invoking the Goddess and use it over the year," he said.

The tabla is a strange instrument. Pulsating and throbbing with life in some hands and dull and lifeless in others. The

maestro attributes this to two factors. "Either there is not enough tapasya — practice to the level of penance — or lady luck does not smile. On the other hand, when the doors of Brahma, the creator, open, all falls into place."

Things obviously fell into place for him, but not before he went through his share of trials. Perhaps pain is a necessary element of an artiste's creativity. For, just as beauty sans a flaw is characterless, pain bestows a character that is special.

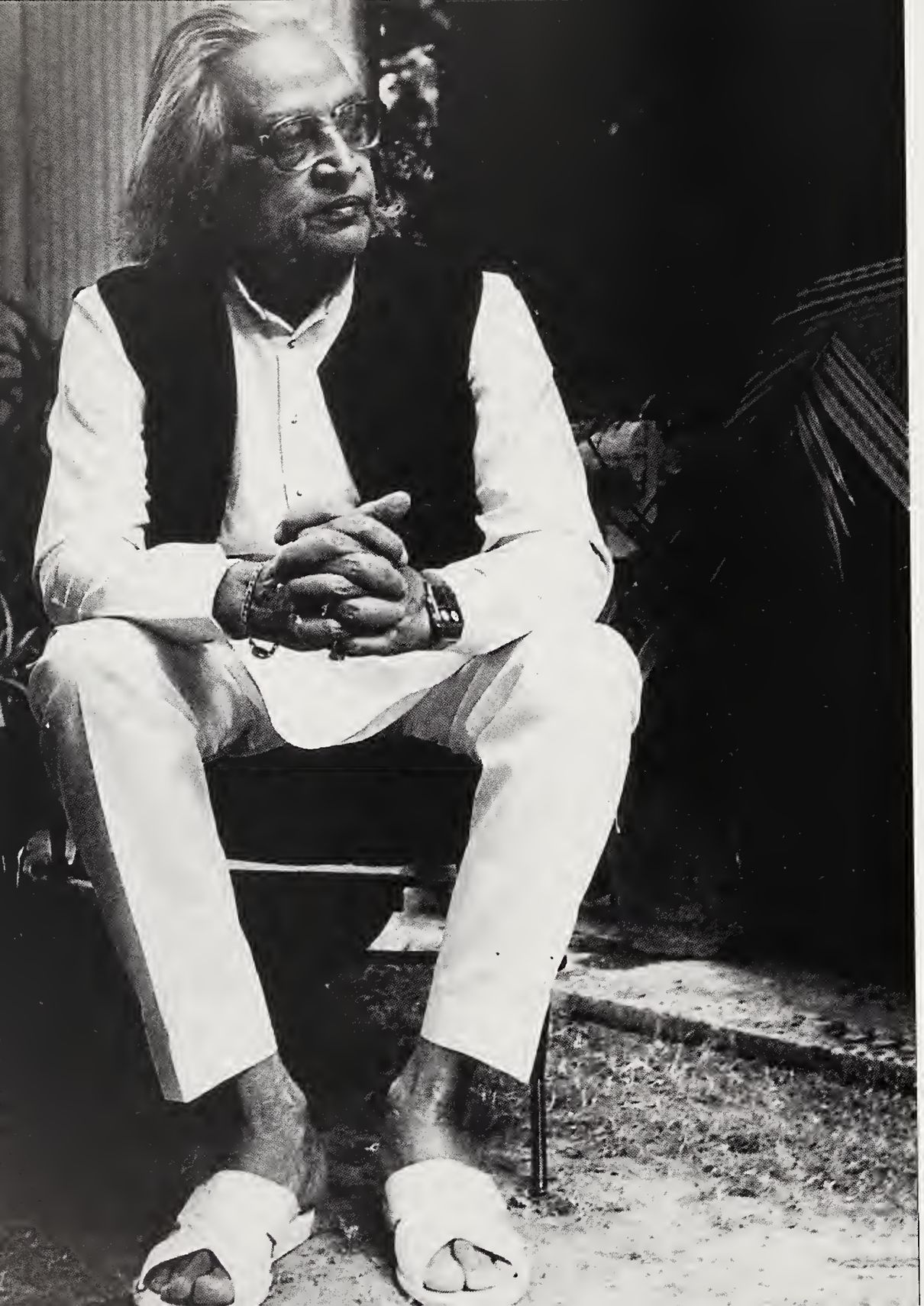
Calling out to someone to get his 'paan', he proudly shows us his collection of pigeons. If tabla is his profession, pigeons are his passion. He takes care of the birds himself and speaks of them like his children. There is a peculiar old world charm about his lifestyle and it fits Kabir Chaura to the last letter.

His brand of charm is tinged with the rustic, just as his music is. For unlike his contemporary, Samta Prasad, Kishan's tabla never produced a sound that was mesmeric in its sweetness but was more like the sparkle of diamonds — hard and brilliant.

"When my father and Ahmadjan Thirakwa were alive, we used to consider ourselves children. When they died, they said tabla was dead, but it survived. The power of your ancestors comes into you when they die. Like the shadow of the guru protecting you. It was very strange. Till as late as '68, my 'bayan' — left drum — playing was not so powerful. After my father died in '69, I was asked to play solo for the first time. When I played the 'uthan', even my father's students had tears in their eyes for it was so much like his playing. I played for four hours..." he trails off.

"My father used to say that that if my son learns well, money will never be a problem. When he died, he left behind only Rs 150. I never spent it. But that day I decided that I would never be financially dependent on anyone. I went to learn from my father's elder brother and learnt with the true spirit of a student," recounts the tabaliya.

"You mark my words. After the likes of Ravi Shankar and Vilayat Khan pass into eternity, their students will emerge. It is the guru who has to set the example. If the guru is too busy indulging in wine and women, what will he teach his students? People do not understand the meaning of guru shishya parampara. It is imperative to serve the guru with all one's heart. I would sit and massage my guru's feet for hours and when he was happy, he would teach me a new composition! It was like prasad — a gift from the guru. Today's students don't even have the basic knowledge of music — 'swar gyan' — they take an hour to tune the sitar! Gurus are oblivious to it," he says with ill-concealed disgust.



Banaras has a special place in the development of the tabla. The Banaras style of playing the tabla is 'chaumukhi' — versatile — which incorporates the best elements of all styles — dhrupad, khayal, tappa, tarana and thumri. And Kishan, who has done his bit for the instrument's development, has fond memories of going to the banks of the Ganga when there used to be lively musical exchanges with the 'tawaifs' or the nautch girls of Banaras. Called 'badhais' in the local parlance, these musical repartees had the musicians and dancers preparing for days in advance to outdo one another!

Playing since the days when there were no mikes and consequently no dependence on them, Kishan's playing can be heard at the back of the auditorium. There is an unbridled quality about his music. "I know how to play 'khula. Swar woh jo duniya ke samajh aye. Laya woh jo layadaar ke samajh mein aye', — words must be understood by all and the rhythm must be understood by the real connoisseur," he says firmly.

"Nobody sees how much knowledge you really have," he cites the example of the great musicologist Chhote Ram Dasji who was hooted out. "A musician should be knowledgable enough to defeat a vidwan, but at the same time be able to interact with the audiences. Audiences want to hear a complete artiste."

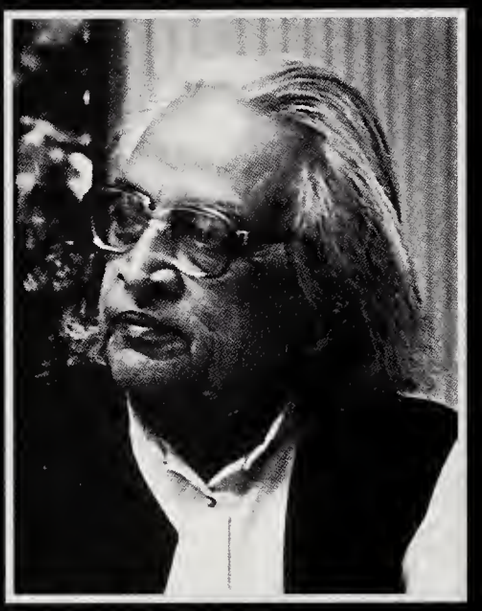
Kishan Maharaj at a concert in Banaras in the late 70s.

Deriding the trend of classical musicians playing light music, Kishan, says, "I can't play that kind of music. Have you ever seen a 1000 watt bulb giving the same amount of light as a 500 watt one?"

He has great flourish as a performer. "We fill colours with our hands," he says with a satisfied smile. Apart from accompanying musicians, Kishan is a great favourite of Kathak dancers as well. Playing for Kathak is rather challenging. If a tabaliya does not have a sharp memory or remember a variety of 'tukdas' or 'paran' compositions, he can emerge looking quite sheepish, for dancers can often choose or change their pieces right on the stage. "Whenever I have performed with dancers, I have not let my guru down," says Kishan.

This pride carries forward in other aspects of his life as well. "When time is favourable to you, anyone is happy to become your 'daamad' (son-in-law) and when things go wrong, none is willing to become even your father-in-law! One should retire and take sanyas before the wheel of time dips for you. You will not hear that Kishan Maharaj is going through bad times. You see, when that time comes, just assume that I am not alive any longer. For those who serve music, music will be enough for them, in all senses of the term."

KISHAN MAHARAJ



Born in Varanasi in 1923, Pandit Kishan Maharaj received his training in the tabla from his illustrious uncle Pt Kanthe Maharaj. He gave his first major public performance at the age of eleven. Under the tutelage of his guru, he achieved equal proficiency in providing accompaniment to vocal and instrumental music as well as to Kathak dance. One of the foremost tabla players of the day, he has accompanied almost all the leading musicians and dancers of north India in the last few decades. He has also been acclaimed as an outstanding soloist. His duets with other eminent masters of the tabla and the mridangam have added a new dimension to Indian instrumental music.

He has been honoured with the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award and the Padma Shree.

RAM NARAYAN

I play with all the colours

After an all-night concert in Krishna's town Vrindavan, bleary-eyed, I was in a terrible hurry to get to the ramshakle dharmshala to meet the great tabaliya Pandit Samta Prasad. He was leaving for Banaras in a couple of hours and I didn't want to miss him. As I came down into the dawn-kissed courtyard of the old haveli where I was staying, sat a middle-aged, balding man playing the sarangi while a photographer clicked away.

He was to perform that evening and even in my hurry I noticed the involvement with which he was playing, even though it was a photo session and not an audio one! The year was 1990 and the musician was the sarangi maestro Pandit Ram Narayan. His relentless and single-handed efforts in establishing the sarangi as a solo instrument as opposed to its ubiquitous use as an accompanying one are now part of the musical journey of the Indian sub-continent. I wished I could have stayed to listen, but in retrospect, it was just as well that I didn't. For it turned out to be my last meeting with Pandit Samta Prasad before he died in 1994.

Relaxing before the concert : Pandit Ram Narayan

There were a few concerts in various parts of the country where I did listen to the sarangi maestro, but for one or the other reason, a meeting never took place. In early 1996, he was to play in New Delhi and the moment I heard this, I asked a musician friend to help fix up a meeting. He called Ram Narayan in Bombay and even though he was in town only for a day, he agreed. But fate plays strange tricks. I ruptured a ligament of my foot. Against medical advice, I decided to keep the appointment.

On reaching there I was told that he was not in. After waiting restlessly for half an hour with increasing pain in the foot, I was cursing myself for not paying heed to my doctor, came the receptionist, profusely apologising for a mix-up about hanging keys in the wrong slot. Muttering unprintables, I reached his room. With only two hours to go for his concert, he was practicing with his son, where the two were to perform together. He put away his instrument while the son continued to

give last minute instructions to the accompanists.

Without any preamble, he came straight to the point. "The sarangi is the very soul of Hindustani music. It can reflect all the shades — sab rang (all colours) — of music like no other instrument. It can follow or express the human voice the best. Most people are not qualified to understand this instrument. Bach was one of the very few who really understood and contributed the maximum for its development. And even my own work is mostly thanks to Europeans despite the fact that sarangi figures prominently in ancient Indian temple sculptures," he said.

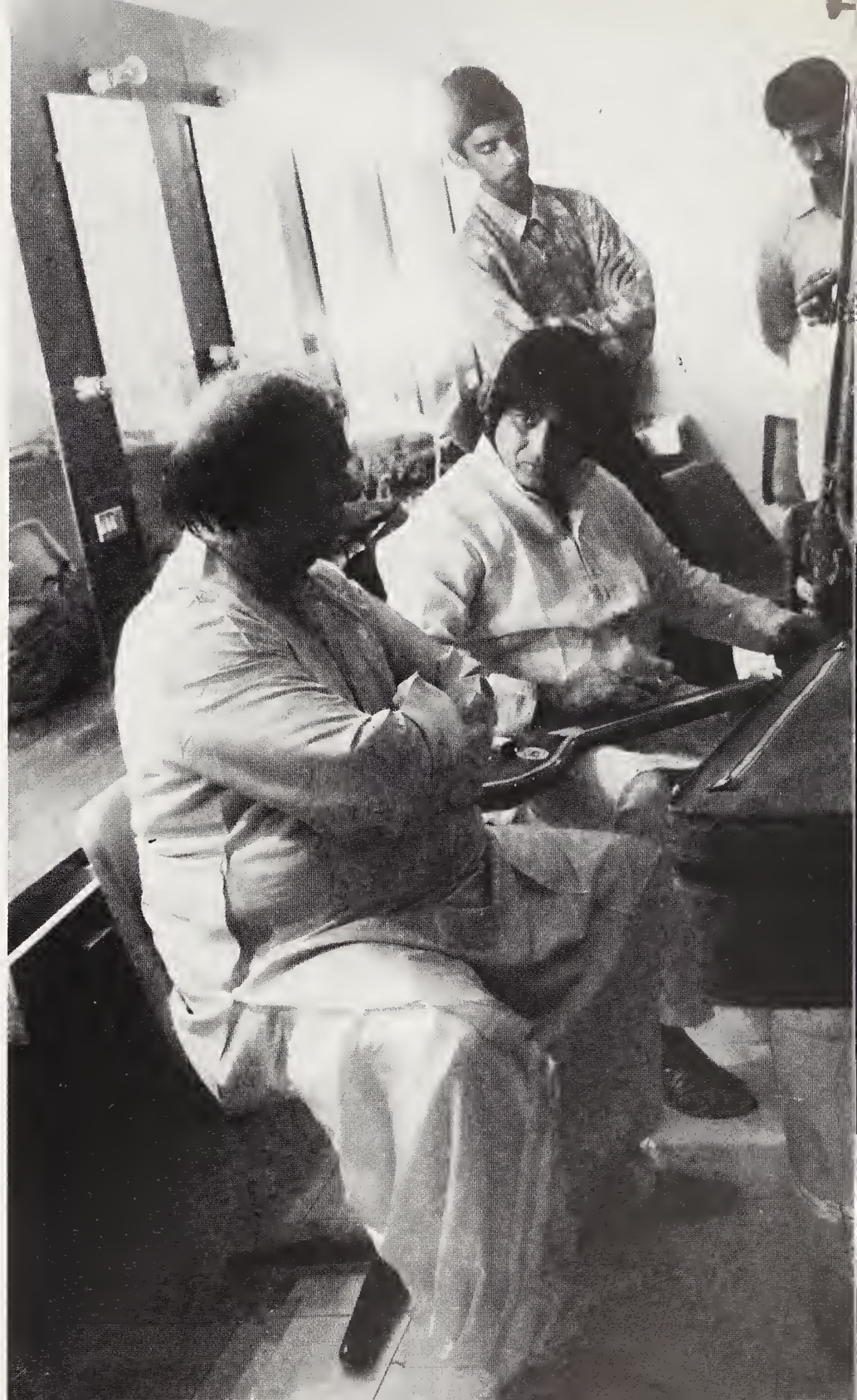
What about its new-found status as a solo instrument? "Except perhaps the sole exception of the tanpura, all Indian musical instruments can stand on their own," he was quick to retort. "One was surrounded with so many people who did not understand this and one had no choice but to continue as an accompanist. It was a difficult time... After the death of musical greats like Krishnarao Shankar Pandit and Ameer Khan whom I used to accompany, I had to play solo. When one can't have a dialogue, one may as well have a monologue! But even as an accompanist, I would make sure that if the audiences heard do baat of the main musician, they heard one of mine!"

Playing second fiddle — quite literally — is not easy.

Especially when one is sure of one's merit. It must not have been a cake walk for him either, I wondered. "It wasn't. Accompanists have got a raw deal, especially good accompanists. It is stifling for one's music,but one gets to interact with the top musicians and one has to have a greater awareness than the musician you are to accompany. You begin with the premise — aap kya kehtain hai? You have to mould your thinking to that of the other musician so that you can match it and only those who know better can do it," he said with a touch of pride.

Pride is not enough to fill the stomach. Many years were spent just keeping body and soul together. He joined the radio and rose to become the highest paid accompanist but that too wasn't enough. He had to take recourse to playing for cinema as well. In Bollywood circles it was said that if you get Ram Narayan to play, it was equivalent to getting three sarangi players. But for him, the memories of this sojourn are almost misty now. Only with prompting from his son and other musicians is he able to recall a few names of films in which he has played.

"Seema, Mamta, Adalat, Noorjehan, Taj Mahal, Mughal-e-Azam, Kshudita Pashan, Abhijan..." he recollected some of the films and trailed off. That these films span an era of film music that can best be described as golden, it is something which probably did



Pandit Ram Narayan with son Brij Narayan

not occur to him. "But it was not what I wanted to do with my music — maan ki baat nahin thi — my heart wasn't in it," he said with a finality which did not brook further discussion.

"The only thing that kept me going was the love of music. Kabhi koi baat paida hoti hai jo der tak chale — there are few things which last a lifetime. Sacrifices have to be made by someone before others are able to reap the fruits," he said obviously referring to his own toil. He too made his share of sacrifices. Starting out as a school teacher in Udaipur, his hometown, on a princely sum of Rs 50 per month, he got a raise.

Far from being happy, his guru rebuked him. He said, "you are getting entangled in the mundane, today it is a raise, tomorrow it will be children, the third day it will be a cycle. Music will take a backseat then. I quit the next day. My brother, the tabla player Pandit Chatur Lal offered to support me if I opted out. How many people have that kind of option?"

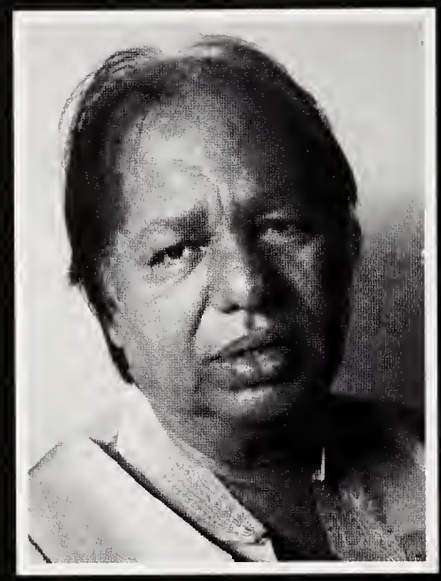
"There are two kinds of people whose life is touched by music. One who think of it as a means of livelihood, the other for whom it is bhakti. I think I belong to the latter category. The language of music is that of the nad-brahm. I am a great believer and I feel I have got more than my shradha or expectation. But today musicians demand money even before they step on the stage. Can true knowledge really survive in this scenario? I firmly believe that music is something you are born with. You either have it or you don't. And only this kind of musicians are able to leave a permanent mark on the sands of time," he declared firmly.

While Ram Narayan's son took to the sarod, his daughter took to her father's instrument. How come the shift in the son's case? "It is upto the student. It is the quality that matters not the instrument," he insisted. Fond father that he is, he insisted that it is she who has inherited the father's mantle.

Hitting out at the commercialisation of classical music, Ram Narayan said, "Musicians today are more concerned about the outward. Fancy kurtas and tampering with the literature of music, they would rather make new ragas. Tell me, what is wrong with the old ones? These are the same musicians who sing ragas at the incorrect times and then claim great musical lineage! Can knowledge survive in such a scenario? Sensitivity is not something you can learn, you have to be born with it," he declares.

On that note, he glanced at his watch with a start. His performance slated for the evening momentarily forgotten, surfaced again. I could see that he was getting restive to prepare himself for the recital. I limped out, plaster and all...

RAM NARAYAN

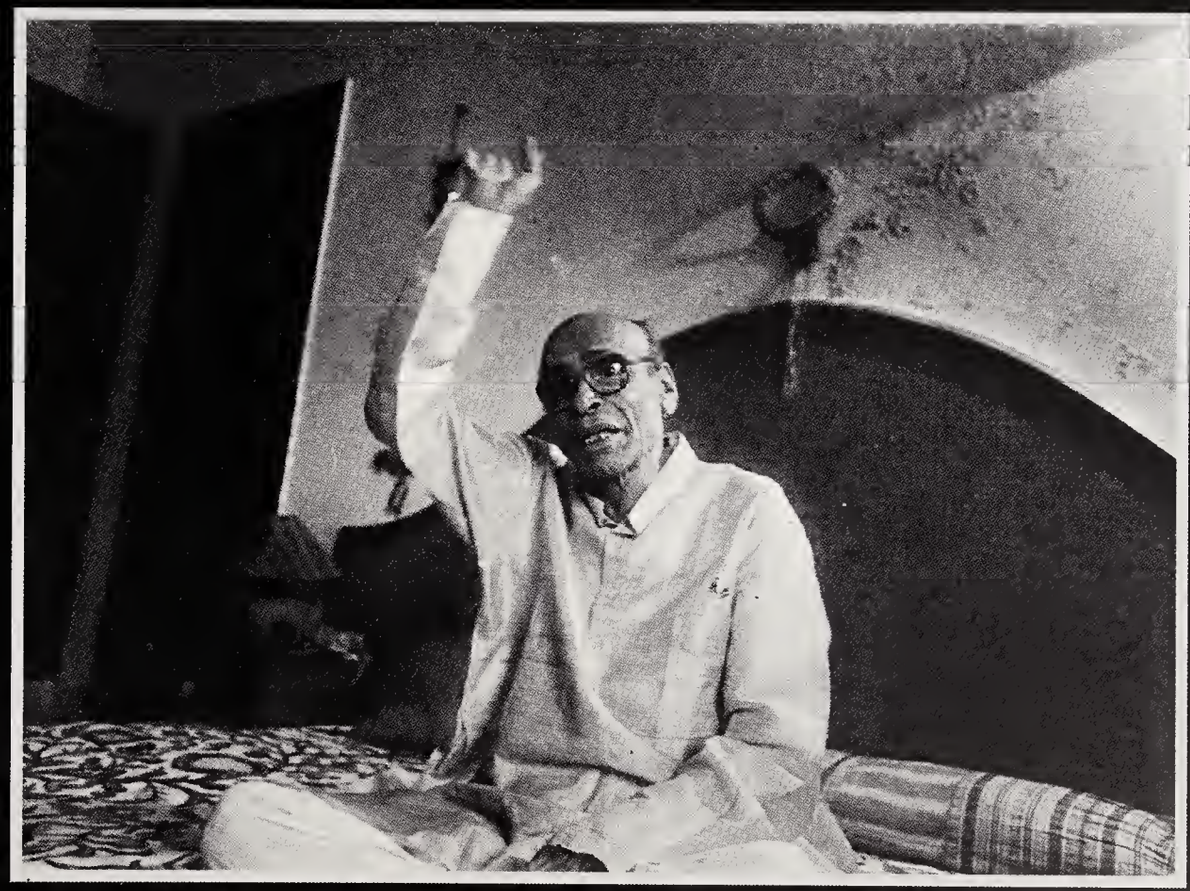


Born in 1927, in Udaipur, Pandit Ram Narayan received his early training in music from his father, Nathuji Biawat and later studied with Uday Lal, Madhav Prasad and Abdul Wahid Khan. His style has at its core, the flavour and manner of the Kirana gharana but his personal touches have imparted a distinctive character to it.

His work is noted for its impeccable and effortless technique. To him belongs the credit of helping the sarangi achieve the status of a solo instrument.

He has been honoured by the Sangeet Natak Akademi award, the Padmashree and the Padmabhushan.

MALLIKARJUN MANSOOR



I sing for my spiritual guru

They said he was the last of the purists. Everytime they heard him, it struck a chord somewhere. For each syllable was sung with the authority of a maestro totally in control of his song.

Lanky and sparse to the point of being emaciated, with his skin stretched taut as if to keep the bones together, Mallikarjun Mansoor came back from the dead a few months before he died in 1993.

"The doctors said I was gone." He had joked when he recovered, "Coma mein chale gaye the, par hum phir aa gaye. Kuch kaam shayad reh gaya tha" — I had slipped into a coma, but maybe some work was left incomplete, so I came back. Little did he know that the Boatman was merely biding his time. This time He did come to fetch him and ferry him across the river.

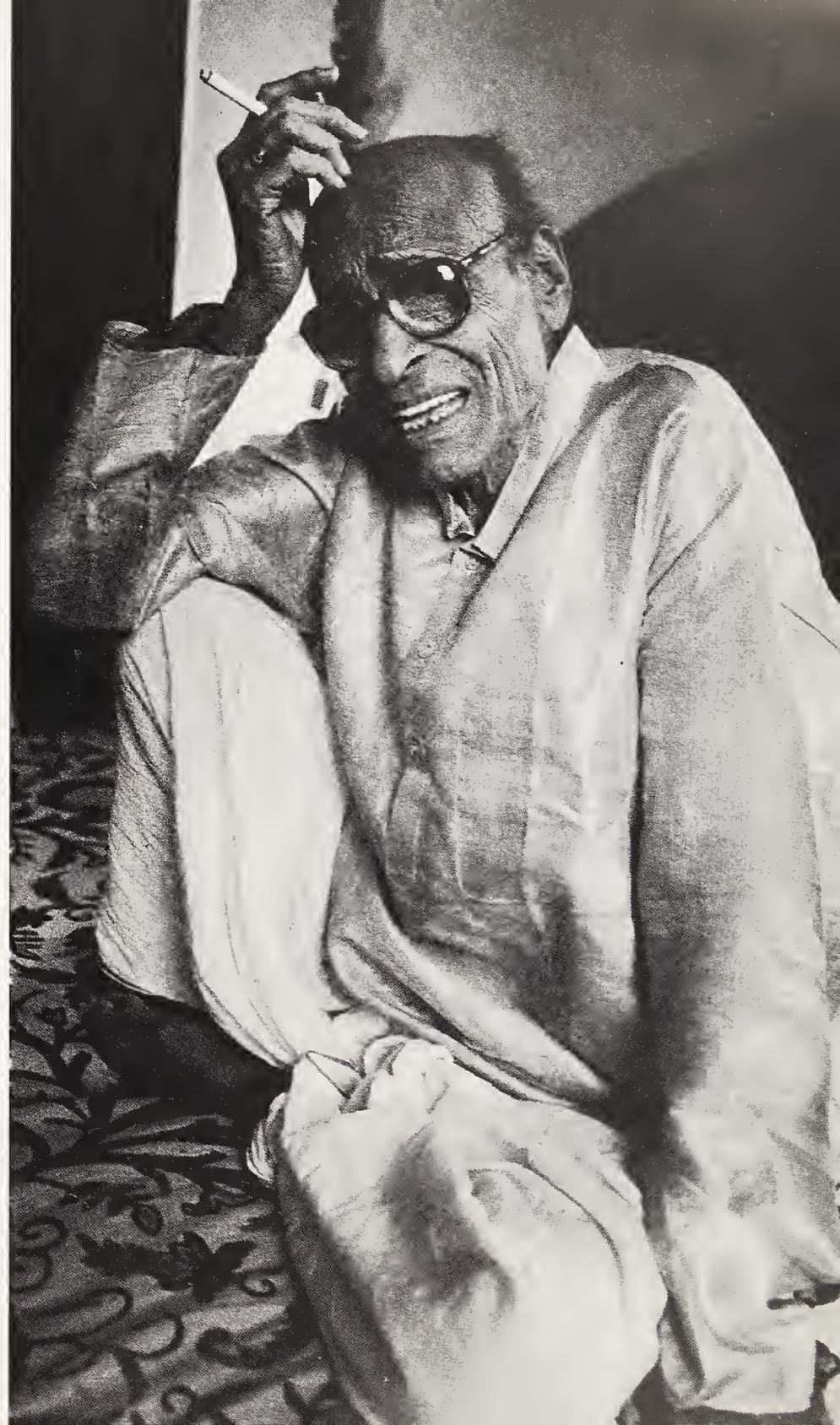
A few days before his death, I had gone to meet him at a fellow journalist's house. Clad in only a vest and dhoti, he hastily pulled on a kurta. His simplicity was legendry. Not overly impressed by either high office or rank, he sat on a low diwan, holding court. Except, that he seemed a part of the court rather than its leader. Clutching a cigarette, a habit he did not want to chuck despite ill-health, he had requested a five-minute break midway through his recital — he wanted a smoke badly.

Reticent to the point of being painfully shy, answering only in monosyllables before opening up, and articulating his thoughts in Hindi, Pt Mansoor came across as a man of strong likes and dislikes despite his unassuming simplicity, and all the honours and accolades showered on him, including the Padma Shree, Padma Bhushan and the Padma Vibhushan.

A stickler for correct pronunciation, in a scenario where vocal gymnastics reign supreme and scant attention is paid to the all-important word, Mansoor laid great stress on correct and clear enunciation. "They don't understand the meaning of 'uchcharan' — pronunciation. The gurus are also at fault. Whether it is Maithili, Hindi or Urdu, they must make it a point to learn and understand the words correctly themselves before imparting 'taalim' or training to students. The musical experience of a 'bandish' or composition is totally different if it is sung with understanding and emotion," the maestro said.

His music came from deep down. "Your soul should come across in your music. Just singing sa-re-ga-ma does not make a raga. Each raga has a personality, an emotional content, a body. If you sing without understanding the 'bhava' or emotional dimensions of a raga, it is simply meaningless."

"I sing for my 'adhyatmik' (spiritual) guru. The photograph of my guru in music, Neelakanthabua, is safely tucked away in my pocket while I sing. Each note that I sing is dedicated to my mentor." According to Mansoor, finding the right guru and the right vision is a matter of destiny. And he was lucky enough to find the right guru at the right time. Picked up by Neelakanthabua of Miraj, the well-known exponent of the Gwalior gharana, he later studied under Alladiya Khan of the Jaipur-Atrauli gharana and his two sons, Manjikhan and Burjikhan. But he was no clone of his



illustrious gurus. Once, irritated by someone comparing his 'badhat', the accent of the raga, to that of his guru's, Mansoor is known to have remarked, "Hum Bade miyan ke kya khali stenographer hain?" (Am I a mere steno of my guru?)

This is not to say that he undermined the role of the guru. "You can have any number of institutions but without the right guru, there is no 'gyan' — knowledge. You must learn from one guru. 'Bahut ko nahin, ek ko sadho' (pursue a single goal). If there is purity of swara, rhythm and melody, everything else will just flow," he stressed. In his case it really did flow — right from his mellifluous voice into the listeners' hearts.

A rare combination of the Gwalior-Jaipur-Atrauli gharana, he had about 125 ragas in his repertoire — some of which were unheard by even accomplished singers, let alone the connoisseurs. Often accused of singing little-known ragas, Mansoor said with ill-concealed pride, "I know these ragas well, so I sing them. Do the other singers, who complain, have this taalim?"

Mansoor's last concert at the Murughamutt in Dharwad was, in a sense, the culmination of his secular involvement with religion. "My faith in God has had a deep effect on my music," he said. This found expression in his popularising the vachanas, religious texts of the Shiva Sharnas of the twelfth century.

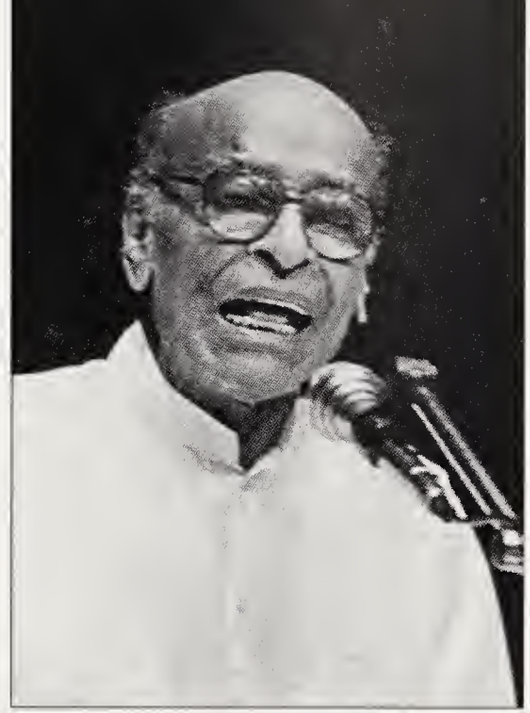
If there is purity of swaras everything else will follow : Mansoor at one of his last interviews

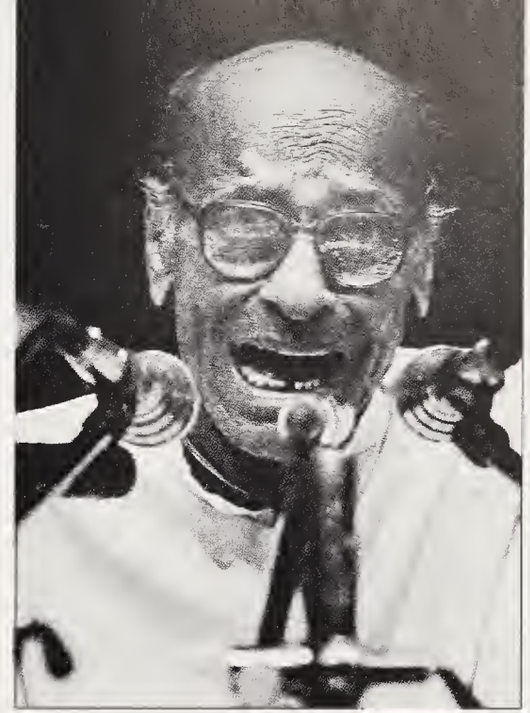
His voice could harness the intricate and delicate 'taankari' so peculiar to the placid tempo of the Jaipur-Atrauli style of singing with great ease. Mansoor, as other musicians, had several favourite ragas. Often exhibiting a penchant for variations of the ragas Nat, Basanti Kedar or Adambari Kedar, Bihari, Nat-Bihag, Kafi-Kanara and Devasaakh, he mesmerised the audiences with the amazing range and tone of his voice, so carefully nurtured and preserved.

His legacy in terms of his disciples is limited to his son, Rajshekhar, and one other student. "I never had the time to teach more people. For I spend nearly eight hours every day in perfecting my own gayeki. Besides, all those people who wanted to learn from me did not want to stay in Dharwad and I was not willing to move out," he said simply. Out of seven daughters, only one sings for the radio; the rest know music, but do not perform publicly.

Speaking on the guru-shishya parampara, the teacher-disciple tradition, Mansoor recalled how several people came to learn, but few became singers. "Out of a hundred, only four become singers. Besides, there are very few real students in the traditional format."

Simple to the point of being ascetic, he never joined the rat race for high- profile living, remaining till the end rooted to his own earth. Deeply in love with Dharwad, he refused to leave it for all the honours in the world, coming out only





for performances. "How can I leave my home, my wife, my children?" he asked.

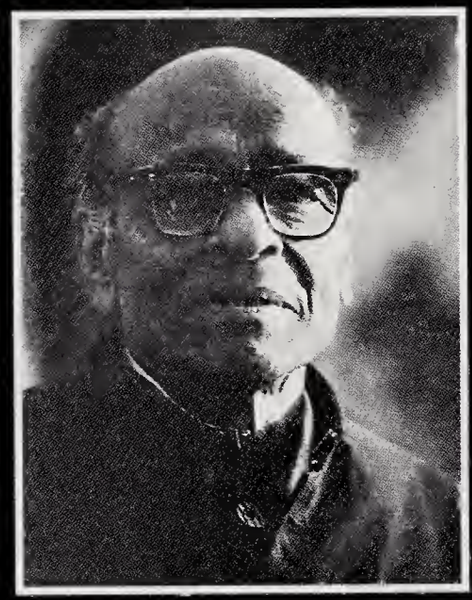
This was one of the reasons why he did not enjoy singing abroad. "What do they understand of our music? Gana gaana hai to apne desh mein gao. Woh dollar dalte to hum sab kyon bhag ke jaye? (If you want to sing, sing in your own country. Why should we go running at the flash of dollars?) I would rather sit and sing in a one-room house in my own country than huge auditoriums abroad," he said.

"The British did not help our music one bit. It is, after all, not part of their culture. The erstwhile princely states helped us and encouraged us by giving 'nazraana'. The Holkars were great patrons. They used to sit with bags of money around the throne. If they liked your singing, all that they touched would be yours. I remember Dilip Chandra Babu of Calcutta, who sent me Rs 500 in those days. He said 'man ho to raat mein kuch gayiye' — If you feel like it, sing something in the night. I stayed there for six months, during which time I was under no compulsion to sing. But I missed Dharwad so much, that I came back," he recalled.

Choosing to maintain a studied silence over the quality of today's singing, Mansoor said, "The popularity of classical music has increased, so have the aspirants. What else?"

A musician's musician in the true sense of the term, the maestro has left his beloved Dharwad — this time, forever. And no amount of consolations by way of tapes and records can replace the phenomenon called Mallikarjun Mansoor.

MALLIKARJUN MANSOOR



Born in 1910, at Mansoor (Mysore), Pandit Mallikarjun Bhimarayappa Mansoor was an accomplished singer of Khayals with a blend of the Jaipur and Gwalior gharanas. He also specialised in rendering vachanas in Kannada.

Trained by Neelkanthbua Mirajkar of the Gwalior gharana, Manji Khan and Buruji Khan of the Jaipur gharana, he was honoured by various societies and received the Padma Shree and the Padma Bhushan.

He was Sangeet Salahkar of All India Radio and was associated with the Department of Music, Karnataka University, Dharwar. He died in 1992.

HARI PRASAD CHAURASIA

Ragas are not fixed deposits

I hijacked him soon after his concert. Thunderous applause ringing in his ears, his flute still warm, Pandit Hari Prasad Chaurasia, was a willing hostage. His turquoise blue kurta with zari bootis still damp from the energetic playing, a white Kashmiri shawl draped carelessly over his shoulders, he seemed oblivious to the Delhi cold. Applause has a way of warming the body.

The moment he sat in the car, he fished out his 'paan' and settled down to be interviewed en route from Siri Fort to his hotel in central Delhi. He was leaving the next day and this was the only time he had. I drove as slowly as possible (honks of irate drivers notwithstanding) to get the maximum time, committing everything to memory to be carefully noted the moment I dropped him off.

He speaks in a matter of fact manner — achieving this without losing the lilt of eastern Uttar Pradesh is quite something. The answers are to the point, with a lyricism that is reflective of his music.

"Only two instruments have been made by God — bansuri and shankh — and they will never go out of vogue. In every 'yug' there will always be people who will play these instruments," he says emphatically.

But why, I ask, negotiating a tricky turn, do so few women take to the flute? "Not anymore. The problem is not about girls or boys, it's just that doctors have scared people into believing that playing the flute is harmful to the respiratory system. But this is not true," he is quick to add. He went through rather rigorous training in body building for several years as he is of the firm belief that a healthy body is a must. For music entails long hours of both riyaz as well as performance.

Is it then a matter of divine blessing to master these instruments, I wonder. "Everything that we do requires the guru's and sadguru's blessings. But we cannot just sit

back and say if the Lord wants me to play, I will play. It is a combination of 'bhagya' or destiny and 'karm' or action," he declares.

As for him, he chose Annapoorna Devi as his mortal guru. She is the daughter of Baba Allauddin Khan and ex-wife of Pandit Ravi Shankar and one of the best exponents of the sitar. She is also a recluse, hardly meeting anyone or giving any public performances. Why did Chaurasia choose her as his guru, considering she doesn't even play the flute?

"It is a matter of 'bhavna', emotion. I got the feeling of 'guru bhavna' only for her. Her music made a deep impact on me. Because of circumstances, she has developed a hatred for the world. She closes her room and shuts out the world, its pollution both at the actual level and at the philosophical level, and just plays for her self..." he says softly.

Whom does he play for? "What we do is showbiz. Playing for Goenka, Sonia Gandhi, you are more concerned about how you are looking, your clothes, lights, stage, sound projection, etc. There is a world of difference when you are playing for yourself. We are invoking the Gods with our notes when we play for ourselves. A true musician needs to make contact with his 'swars' all alone," he says.

The flautist is rather disapproving of those who treat ragas like "fixed deposits" and want to increase the number without knowing their true beauty. "The ones who derive satisfaction from music, can get it from a single 'swar' and there are others who will not get it even from a hundred ragas." He cites the example of the devotee who is satiated by drinking the ritualistic 'charnamrit' and the others who are not content even after eating a full meal of 'halwa-puri'.

"I have been learning raga Yeman for the last 30 years from Guruma. I did not feel the need to even learn anything new, unlike the students of today, who want to learn 10 ragas in one month. That is not music. It is just learning by rote without understanding or exploring the depths of a raga," he stresses.

He holds the present-day education system responsible for it: The over-emphasis on learning the three r's and pre-occupation with acquiring certificates. "How many Ravi Shankars and Alla Rakhas have these schools produced?" he asks. What about his own son, who is doing his MBA? "He will become a musician, but wants to have something in hand, lest he is not able to become a Hari Prasad Chaurasia," he says in defence of his son.

How does he perceive his own role as a guru? "You also travel a great deal," I say, almost accusingly. "Like marriages, we have a concert season in India. My students understand that I will be busy during this season, but they know when I am there with them, I am giving them quality time. Besides, music is not learning one thing today and reproducing it the next day. They do 'riyaz' of music that they learn today and truly assimilate it only after 10 years," he says.

All for 'guru-shishya parampara', he is in the process of setting up his 'gurukul' in Bombay. The government gave him land and a few "well-wishers" helped him to set it up. "I want to revive the 'guru-shishya parampara' as it is the only way music can really be imbibed." He says, "Shehnai will die with Ustad Bismillah Khan. I will not let that happen to the flute. I am training a few promising students."

With increasing corporate sponsorship for the arts, the focus of patronage has shifted. "Thanks to them, at least the artistes and audiences get to meet each other, now that there are no raja-maharajas. When there can be a MTV channel, why can't there be a channel for Indian classical music?" he asks.

Flaying Doordarshan's role, or rather the lack of it, as far as classical music is concerned, he reiterates the need to give more space to performing arts in the audio-visual media. "Television can play a major role if music or dance

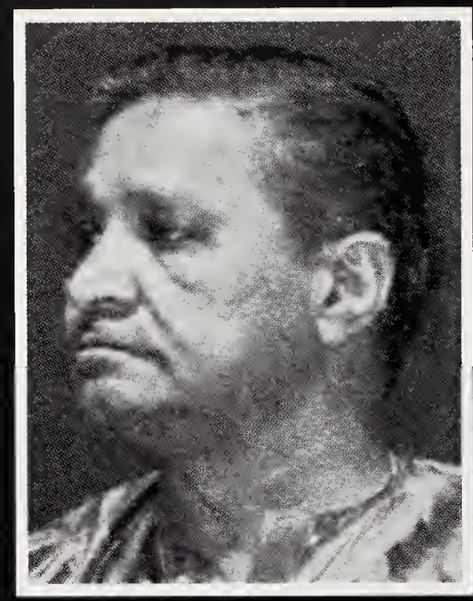
programmes are designed in a manner that they involve newer audiences rather than alienate them," he emphasises.

As for his own role, he has been trying to spread the message of melody via the silver screen. He has teamed up with the santoor maestro Pandit Shiv Kumar Sharma under the banner of Shiv-Hari to compose music for cinema. One of the films whose music got them great critical acclaim was Lamhe. The duo work rather well together since the days when they cut the disc Call of the Valley with Ustad Zakir Husain accompanying them on the tablas. The record was an instant success and still finds takers.

"Film and television are the only way we can reach out to the man on the street. We have such a great tradition of film music. The old melodies still have the power to haunt us so many years after they were made. Our erstwhile music directors were in no way less musicians," says the maestro.

His hotel arrives too soon for my liking. Mumbling something about not being satisfied with 'charnamrit', I bid him adieu with a promise of 'halwa- puri' the next time...

HARI PRASAD CHAURASIA



Born in 1938 in Allahabad, Pandit Hari Prasad Chaurasia was trained in music under Prof Rajaram, Pandit Bholnath and Annapoorna Shankar, the disciple and daughter of Ustad Allauddin Khan of Senia Gharana.

Pandit Chaurasia has evolved, through incessant research, a new style in the technique of playing the flute which has established him as one of the foremost musicians of the country.

A classical musician by temperament, he has also made a mark as an outstanding composer and has introduced innovations in contemporary music. He has several discs to his credit and has also composed music for films. He has been honoured with the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award and the Padma Shree.

M S SUBBULAKSHMI

For me, Bhakti is all

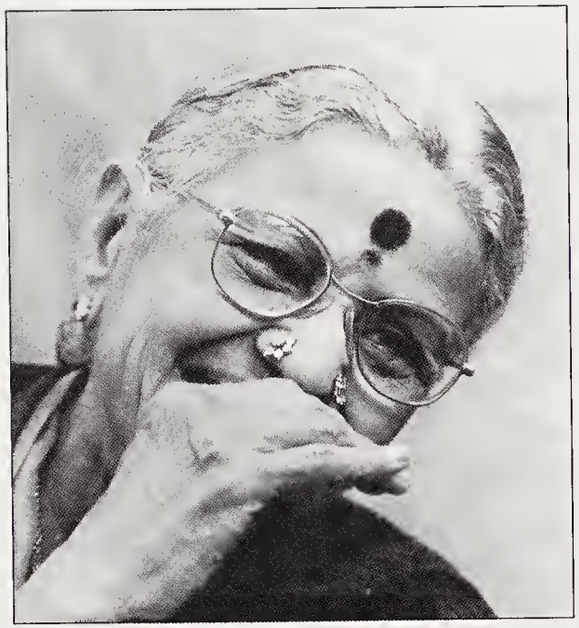
The earliest memory I had of her was of a stunningly beautiful woman in an azure blue saree — a colour that I had heard of as MS blue — with diamonds flash ing in her nose and ears and a huge bindi on her forehead. Even from a distance, the spiritual element of her music and the sheer beauty of her song moved me to tears. I sat under the thatch of Rama Sangeet Sabha in Bangalore, with tears rolling down my cheeks. But even as I was brushing them away, I noticed practically everyone around me was doing the same.

Several years later, I was helping Doordarshan to catalogue their classical music and dance archives which had a few recordings by her. The mesmeric effect she had, even on video, was the same. It was impossible to fast forward her recitals and what was supposed to take a week, took two!

All this while, the desire to meet her remained at the back of the mind. But I knew she didn't grant interviews. All attempts to meet her in Delhi in '93, following a concert, came to naught. The desire to meet her took on an almost feverish pitch. It was strange and overwhelming as if a power beyond my understanding was impelling me.

I called her in Madras. "Amma doesn't give interviews," came the now-familiar refrain of her secretary. I just want to meet her — a courtesy call, I persisted. Several such phone calls later — including one in which I could hear her singing in the background — he relented. I rushed to Madras.

I was to meet her at 4 pm. Apprehensive and tense about last minute hitches, I just paced the hotel room the entire morning. The moment came. And there she was: Still as beautiful and graceful as I remembered, though a trifle fragile. Only her hair had turned an unusual shade of silver. The bindi was as huge as ever with two additional black and saffron dots below it as she is a devotee of Satya Saibaba. The face and feet have a faint colour of turmeric, a popular beauty aid.



MS with (top right) husband Sadasivam and (facing page) with her daughters

Draped in a purple and black checked Kanchipuram saree with a golden yellow border, the diamonds shone brilliant as ever. The beatific smile started at the eyes which had just a hint of sadness; or was it compassion? Not so much from personal pain as from caring for the collective. She reached out with her hands in welcome, her long fingers curling around mine. Dreams have a way of coming true, if you believe in them.

MS, as M S Subbulakshmi is popularly known, was all that I had imagined her to be and more. Warm and gracious, it seemed I had known her all my life and that this was not the first time that we had met. She touched with a feeling of wanting to connect — rather like a fond grandmother.

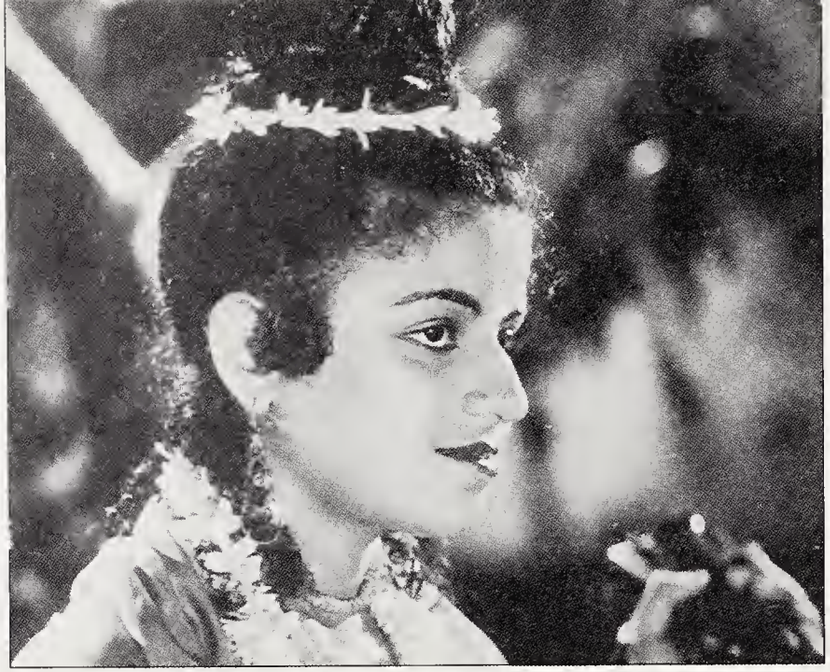
Even admonishing me to drink the entire glass of Horlicks.

Row upon row of old photographs hung on the walls — reminders of an era gone by. Of memories from another time. Yet they still had the power to elicit a smile. Mahatma Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu, Indira Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Duncan, Rajaji rubbing shoulders with Ramakrishna Paramhans, Vivekananda and Satya Saibaba — does she too need a guru?

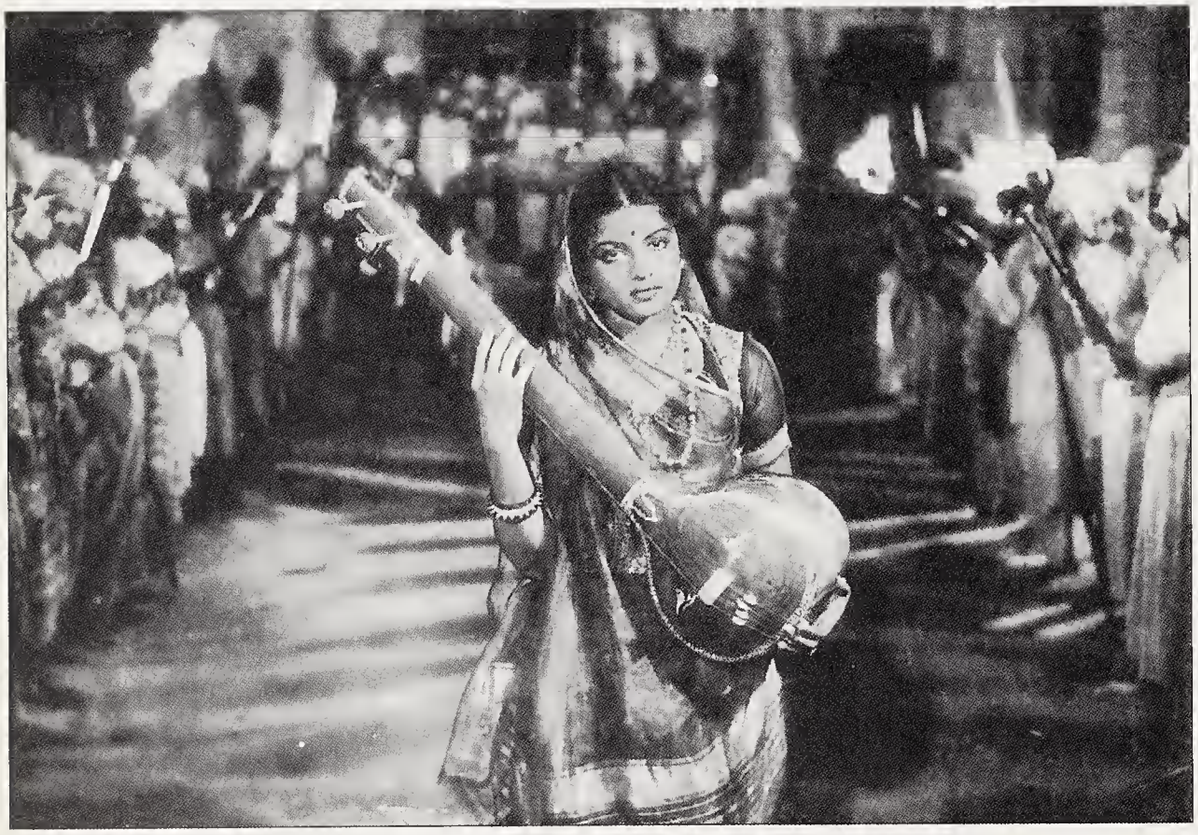
MS points to each photograph, her eyes lighting up in reminiscence. "Indira was just one year younger than me... I was 18 when I first met Jawaharlal... Sarojini Naidu used to playfully hit me and drag me, saying 'come, come Subbu'... So many people we remember," she says softly.

Jawaharlal, drawn to her music, had said: "Who am I, a mere Prime Minister, before a Queen of Song?" Indira, speaking after an invocation song by MS, had declared: "You have asked me for my blessings; anything blessed by an invocation by M S Subbulakshmi is bound to prosper."

Pointing to film director Duncan's photograph, she asked me almost excitedly: "Did you see Meera? He directed it. It was like living the role." She was a little disappointed when I told her that I saw it on television. After seeing the film Sarojini Naidu had said: "It was a true representation of Meera, nay it was Meera herself singing songs of devotion, of prayerful appeal. MS is not an interpreter of Meera, but Meera herself."



MS as Narada in *Savitri* and (below) in and as *Meera*

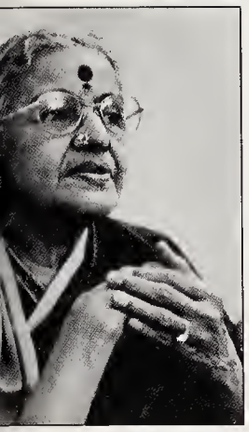


The source of her creativity is 'bhakti' or devotion. Bhakti that is such an intrinsic part of her that it needs no outward manifestation. Her music is rare. And special. For few have the purity of spirit to be able to move audiences to tears every time they sing. "Bhakti is all," she says simply.

She recounts an instance when she had to interrupt a recording midway. "I was singing a bhajan about Krishna. I was crying and so was everyone else. The tears would just not stop..." She bows her head almost imperceptibly as if in remembrance of the Supreme Power. Her music room is just a step away. Dominated by a large television set, on which sits a large black stone statue of Saraswati, the Goddess of Learning, more photographs and framed honours cover the walls. A mridangam and a tanpura wait in anticipation on the floor. "I only sing for charity or a cause now," she says modestly. Her philanthropy is legendary, and most of her royalties from cassettes go to various charities.

What about her legacy? "I have no students. Youngsters don't understand how much practice is required..." she trails off, shaking her head in a gesture of lament. Her daughter, Radha, who used to accompany her for years, is too unwell and now MS is accompanied by her journalist grand-niece Gowri Ramnarayan. "The only way you can sing with her is to totally follow her way. She hardly ever pauses for a breath in between!" says Gowri.

All these years MS has been content to take the back seat



and let her husband Sadasivam, a former journalist, freedom fighter and a close associate of Rajaji, to speak on her behalf. He nurtured her persona and her music. He was a strong personality but age is catching up with him. He is 93, yet comes up with sharp one-liners. Whatever the level of oneness of thought and speech, there must have been many moments, thoughts she may have wanted to articulate but didn't. I sense a desire in her to speak now. Whether it is because his presence is not so overwhelming anymore or because of her own growth I do not know.

"My English is so bad," she said almost shyly. "But it is important just to understand," she added, touching my hand in a gesture that seems to ask whether I understood what she was saying. She is a family person, caring and deeply concerned about everyone's welfare. She wanted to know if I have children. When I told her no, she says almost soothingly, "you are still young. Next time you must come with a baby."

She married Sadasivam at the age of 24. Her entry into the conservative Brahmin household with its strict observance of rituals perhaps had an impact on her music. Even at this age, she is traditional enough not to sit in her husband's rocking chair! When the photographer asked her to pose in that chair, she refused shyly, but resolutely. "No, no. That is mama's chair," she said.

As we prepared to leave, she called out to a servant to get haldi and kumkum. An auspicious ritual for a 'sumangali' or

married woman, she offered me betel nuts, turmeric and a sweetlime on a bed of 'paan' leaves from a traditional wooden plate. She herself proceeded to put red kumkum powder on my forehead and the parting of my hair. I bent down to touch her feet. She is the only artiste whose feet I have touched. She blessed me. The warmth of her presence still lingers. And the 'haldi-supari' go wherever I do...

M S SUBBULAKSHMI

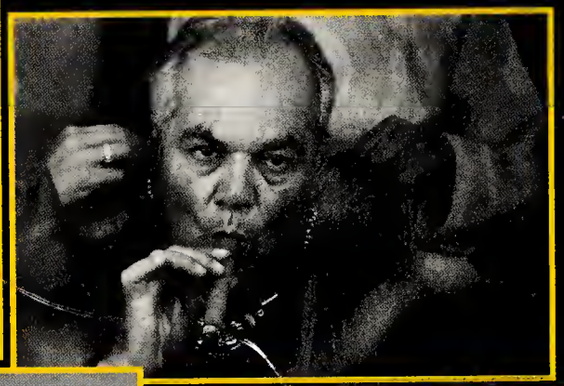
Born in 1916, M S Subbulakshmi received training in Carnatic music from her mother, Shamugavadivu. M S is known both for her mellifluous presentation of ragas and chaste diction. Her rendition of devotional music in south Indian languages as well as in Hindi have won her an entire range of music-lovers.

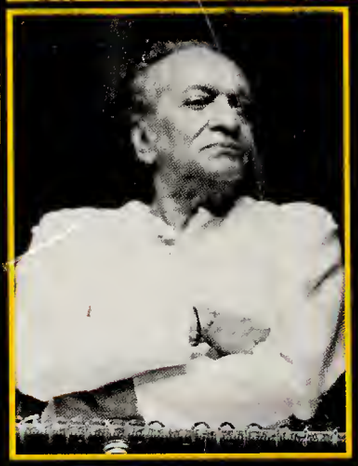
M S has given innumerable concerts abroad, including at the United Nations. She has served many a noble cause by giving benefit concerts. She has been honoured by many academic bodies, including the Venkatesvara University, Delhi University and Rabindra Bharati University. She is the first woman to have received the Sangita Kalanidhi title of the Music Academy, Madras. She is recipient of the Ramon Magsaysay Award, the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, the Padma Bhushan and the Padma Vibhushan. She was elected Fellow of the Sangeet Natak Akademi and was honoured with the Indira Gandhi Award for National Integration.

Alka Raghuvanshi

Writing on the performing and visual arts since 1980, Alka has been published in several newspapers and journals including The Indian Express, The Times of India—where she was on the editorial staff—Hindustan Times, Economic Times, India Magazine, Swagat and Frontline. Former arts editor of the Pioneer, Alka also had a weekly column on theatre for The Financial Express for ten years. She has travelled extensively both in India and abroad to cover art events and file investigative reports on the arts. She has received training in Kathak and Hindustani vocal music.

She presents and produces programmes for All India Radio and Doordarshan. She was honoured with the Chameli Devi Jain Award for outstanding woman media-person of the year 1993. Alka is presently media consultant to the Ministry of Human Resource Development, a trustee of the Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal, and director of the Art Education Trust.





A MOMENT IN TIME

With Legends of Indian Arts